

Coeur de Noir

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13662948) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13662948>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	文豪ストレイドッグス Bungou Stray Dogs
Relationship:	Dazai Osamu/Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs) , Akutagawa Ryuunosuke/Nakajima Atsushi (Bungou Stray Dogs) (Background)
Additional Tags:	Period-Typical Homophobia , Internalized Homophobia , Parental Abuse , okay got the bad stuff out of the way now: , 1930-40's-ish time , French nightclub AU! , Chuuya's a club singer and Dazai is a weak thirsty man , Yosano is a hell matchmaker and double wingwoman , Love Letters , secret admirers/flower meanings , sskk are dueling violinists and are making out in the background , bonus points for the hidden steincraft , I'm not sure exactly what time period so I apologize for any mistakes , Dazai was in one of the world wars I think , those who consume alcohol are of drinking age (in France) so fear not
Language:	English
Collections:	I'm not Allowed to Make Comments on Ongoing Port Mafia Record's Legal Disputes.. BUT
Stats:	Published: 2018-02-13 Chapters: 2/2 Words: 38472

Coeur de Noir

by [AliceinHyruleBastion](#)

Summary

In the noir age of France, where lights glitter and lavishness seeps through the city, a nightclub hides within the shadows, filled to the brim with underground business and a dark energy that spills from its doors.

Welcome to La Chanson Du Noir- The Song of Black- where race, backgrounds, and morals mix together with the intoxication of music and drink.

Dazai Osamu was numb to the warmth of life, and frankly thought nothing of it aside from downing whatever was in his glass at the moment.

However, in the coldness of winter, a flicker of phoenix flame unexpected and unprepared for-

Nakahara Chuuya, a singer with the voice of a siren that had Dazai transfixed the minute he walked on stage.

It was then that a spark was a lit, a magnetic pull that he'd never once encountered before, one that would strip him down to nothing if he didn't chase it, his heart of black finally lit by something other than emptiness.

Notes

This is a goddamn monster, let me tell you holy shit

So I started this in AUGUST and had to take a break, but eventually I got it done and Jesus- this is the longest thing I've ever written, and I have put way too much of myself in it (so much bloody research holy crap)

But I'm done, finally, hallelujah!!

So! without ado, Coeur de Noir, with matchmaking, letters, finely-dressed people, and music, music music!

(All of the letters they exchange are written by me, and I did my best to imitate their actual styles, but ah we'll see how that went)

On another note, all of the songs with lyrics shown are real and time accurate (I hope!), and are here if you'd like to listen, which I highly recommend!

1.) J'Attendrai, Jean Sablon: <https://youtu.be/ApMGZVyEtAY>

2.) Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien, Édith Piaf: <https://youtu.be/Q3Kvu6Kgp88>

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Coeur de Noir

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the back alleys of Paris, a man named Dazai Osamu angrily muttered at the sky as the fabric of his coat got progressively damper, the light snow just enough to bite into the wool as he trekked through the town.

"Damn snow," he cursed, brushing the melting flakes from his shoulder (to no avail) as he leaned back into the door of a club called *La Chanson du Noir*, nudging the door shut with his foot as he started to brush off his other shoulder.

He didn't look up as he started to walk through the aisle of the dark building, having long memorized the room as he slapped at his sleeves and brushed out his hair.

Sighing sharply, he sat down at the bar- second from the left, his usual- next to a dark haired woman speaking with the bartender. Shucking off his overcoat, he held it out in front of him, examining it as he scrunched his nose before folding it over his arm and dropping it on the surface of the bar. "That's going to take *forever* to dry," he complained, glaring at the fabric.

The woman, seated in the seat to his left, rolled her eyes as she picked up her drink. "Considering how long you're usually here for, I'm *sure* it'll be dry by the time you leave," she said musically, smirking into the lip of her glass as Dazai pouted at her.

"You *know* this is my favorite coat, Yosano," he whined, turning to the bartender. "Kunikida, give me something strong enough to drown the sorrows of a ruined coat," he lamented, dramatically placing the back of his hand to his forehead as he leaned against Yosano.

Kunikida, the bartender, raised a thin eyebrow, his arms crossed over the dark blue of his uniform vest. "I ask that you remove your wet coat from my bar first *before* you get your drink," he said coolly, fingers drumming against his arm.

Dazai clicked his tongue, dramatic façade gone as he dropped said coat onto the seat next to him. Kunikida seemed satisfied as he turned to make Dazai's drink, snagging a jar of orange slices and a bucket of fresh ice.

"So, have you heard about the new performance tonight?" Yosano asked Dazai, tracing the rim of her glass, the fabric of her black gloves sharply contrasted by the white of her drink.

Dazai eyed it, his lips twisting faintly. "Your affinity for drinking a summer cocktail in the winter never fails to astound me," he deflected, tugging off his gloves and dropping them on top of his coat.

She scoffed. "Not curious in the slightest?" she pressed, poking at the mint in her drink. "Here I thought you'd like to know how your *protégés* have progressed."

Kunikida set Dazai's drink in front of him, and Dazai immediately slid it toward himself to sip at it, the whiskey biting at his tongue. "In that you are correct, my dear Yosano, as you know I love nothing more than watching them go at each other's throats, but you mentioned a *new*

performance, of which you know I don't care for," he eventually answered, reaching in his glass to grab the sugar cube nestled on top of his ice and placing it on his tongue. "I'm here for the booze and the lovely ladies, not the music." (The sugar stained his tongue and his words, contrasting the bite of his syllables and the alcohol.)

Yosano leaned into the palm of her hand, legs crossing under the dark fabric of her skirt. "Oh, is that so?" she hummed, smile lazy on her face.

Dazai smiled lasciviously, reaching over the edge of the bar while Kunikida had his back turned to snatch one of the tiny stirring spoons. "Of course," he answered, spinning it across his knuckles. "The bright glitter, the tight dresses, those *gorgeous* curves?" He leaned back to peer at her from the corner of his eye. "Now *that's* what I'm here for."

Yosano raised an eyebrow. She was cut off before she could speak, however, as Kunikida turned back to Dazai. "Your constant and unreserved *lust* is incredibly inappropriate," he chided.

Dazai shrugged, leaning back and spreading his arms. "This is a bar hidden in the shadows of Paris," he quipped, the look on his face twisting into something *dark*. "We're nothing more than little rats with even more disgusting hides- who's a little bit of lust gonna hurt?" (As if punctuating the gravity of his words, the edge of suit jacket shifted just slightly enough to expose the handle of a fully-loaded pistol Dazai kept at his hip, the metal glowing just as sharply as his bared-teeth smile.)

Kunikida wasn't swayed by Dazai's declaration. "You can still be a gentlemen despite how *black* your heart may be," he said sharply.

Dazai's face sobered in shock, and Yosano burst into surprised laughter.

"Kunikida, holy *shit*," she blurted, earning her a scolding glare for her profanity.

"Woman and love are not a game, and should both be treated as higher than yourself," Kunikida continued, "which *you* seem to forget, Dazai."

Dazai sipped petulantly at his glass. "I simply enjoy the game more than the prize."

Kunikida clicked his tongue, shaking his head in disapproval.

"I think you mean that no one seems to like you enough to bother staying with you," Yosano corrected, and Dazai gave her an insulted look. She flapped a hand at him. "Don't even try denying it, I've heard your drunk mouth before."

Dazai huffed, deciding to spin the small spoon in his hand again.

"What, no witty reply this time?" Yosano teased, reaching out to hook the stem of her glass and take a sip, eyes laughing at Dazai over the rim of it.

It was at this moment Kunikida narrowed in on the utensil in Dazai's fingers, and he propped a hand on his hip with a level sigh. "*Dazai*, how many times have I told you not to play with items from my bar?" He scolded, glaring at him over the top of his glasses.

The spoon stopped spinning to point at Kunikida, loose in Dazai's grip. "Kunikida," Dazai purred

languorously, leaning forward onto it. "You should *really* learn how to relax, after all, it's not as if this bar *belongs* to you, now does it?"

Kunikida stiffened, eyes sharpening angrily.

"Ah, calm down, I was only teasing you," Dazai cut in, holding up his hands in mock surrender to silence Kunikida. "You're too easy to get to."

Before either could continue talking, Yosano let out an excited coo before untucking her legs to lean forward. "The show's about to start," she announced, and Dazai swung around to peer at the stage.

Down the slanted aisles where tables lay nestled in the dark, a small stage paired with a tiny pit was lit brightly at the back of the room, a pair of open doorways flanking it; the left was a stairway up to the residency of the *La Chanson du Noir* where many of the staff resided (such as many of the orchestra and a few of the wait staff, as well as one of the co-owners, Fukuzawa Yukichi), while the right side led downstairs to the basement where other unsavory businesses underwent work in the muddled secrecy of the darkness.

Tonight, only two musicians sat in the pit just below the stage to the left: a cellist, her dark hair twisted up in an elegant bun and a fine black dress, was speaking with the violinist, a younger boy with choppy white hair who was fretting with the knot of his tie. The cellist leaned over to smooth it down for him, earning a grateful smile from that she mirrored.

(Ah, Dazai thought, *it's just Atsushi's night. Well, **he** must be upset his **sister** gets to play and he doesn't.*)

Settled on stage was a single microphone stand and a chair just behind it, a brilliantly red curtain hiding the rest of the stage. The front of the stage remained empty as lights came up upon it.

"*Ladies and gentlemen, newcomers and regulars alike, may I have your attention,*" a voice rang out from the crackling speakers- Edoawa Ranpo, adopted son of Fukuzawa and *La Chanson's* snarky entertainment announcer as well as (tentatively) retired pianist. "*Tonight, **La Chanson du Noir** presents a new guest performer tonight, an esteemed singer from the lovely heart of France itself!*"

So, a Frenchwoman, hm? Well, this should be fascinating.

"*Playing tonight with violinist Nakajima Atsushi and cellist Akutagawa Gin, we proudly present Nakahara Chuuya, with the lovely classic **J'attendrai!***" (Ranpo repeated the message in French for the remaining patrons before the lights dimmed in preparation for the curtain to lift.)

"*Chuuya?* Well, that doesn't sound very cute," Dazai muttered to himself, and Yosano shot him a mischievous look as the room applauded politely.

With that, the curtain lifted, and Nakahara Chuuya came forward, graciously receiving the applause before stepping up to the microphone.

Dazai's eyes widened, and the spoon in his fingers dropped to the bar with a clatter.

Contrary to what Dazai had believed, Nakahara Chuuya was most decidedly *not* female, and Dazai was completely frozen as he digested the person in front of them.

Dressed in a rich burgundy suit- his vest matching the coat draped over the back of the chair, Chuuya rolled up his sleeves and dropped a black hat with a small silver chain stretched over the brim atop the seat of the chair before preparing himself at the microphone.

He was thin, and Dazai had the horrible fleeting thought of *I could easily box his hips with my hands* (Dazai felt his stomach lurch at the realization), the fabric of the suit fitting near perfectly and pulling in all of the right directions, his shoulders small and narrow yet prominent, and he could see the fine tone of muscle lining them. Dazai felt underdressed in his shabby brown suit, the edges long gone frayed from wear after wear.

Looking closer, Dazai could see the flash and glitter of red studs in his ears, and makeup just a touch dark enough to be seen from the audience; makeup on a man in this time was not common, if a bit of a stigma, but he wore it well, the color just bright enough to draw out the stunning blue of his eyes. (Sharp red lines traced at the edges of his eyes like flaming wings, the touch of red at his lips, the faint rouge at his cheeks- *How does he make it work?*)

But what caught Dazai's attention the most was the man's *hair*, which was pinned back on the right side with an ornamental crystal hair pin (*Japanese?*) that matched the color of his earrings, the rest of the fiery strands spilling down his left shoulder should to expose the pale skin of his neck.

Then- oh *then*- he started to *sing*, and Dazai felt the bottom of his stomach drop (his jaw dropped as well, if slightly).

With the simplicity of the strings and their gentle pizzicato plucking underneath him, the cello occasionally switching to lower, smoother strokes, the words rolled effortlessly off of his tongue in tones of silvered honey, the language perfectly fitting underneath it and through his teeth.

*"J'attendrai, le jour et la nuit,
J'attendrai toujours,
Ton retour, j'attendrai, (J'attendrai)
Car l'oiseau qui s'enfuit
Vient chercher l'oubli dans son nid.
Le temps passe et court,
En battant tristement dans mon cœur si lourd
Et pourtant j'attendrai ton retour..."*

*("I will wait night and day,
I will wait forever,
For you to come back, I will wait, (I will wait)
For the bird flying away
Comes to seek oblivion in its nest.
Time flies and runs,
Beating sadly in my oh-so heavy heart
And yet I will wait for you to come back..."*)

Despite how small he was, the sound that spilled from his lips- eyes shut, body swaying, *hips* swaying, fingers gently around the stand- was unearthly rich, balancing the line between high and low as it swooped and filled the gaps between the syllables.

He was comfortable on the stage, his words enchanting the audience like the charm of a siren as if he was *born* to do it, ensnaring them all in crimson thread and dragging their attention toward him; he was dangerous, just as he was beautiful-

And Dazai was *smitten* .

"Dazai honey, you're drooling," Yosano teased, the sound of her voice snapping him from his reverie.

At her interruption, Dazai snapped his jaw shut with a click and tore his eyes away from the performance, instead focusing intently on his drink. (His heart swooped as the richness of the song continued.)

Yosano looked happier than a cat who had finally caught her mouse, and even *Kunikida* looked interested. "I *knew* you'd like him," Yosano said deviously.

"Don't make such outlandish assumptions- he's no beautiful lady," Dazai replied airily, but his ears were burning and pink-tipped as he lifted the drink to his lips. He refused to meet her eyes.

"And yet, you seem more enthralled with him than any woman I've seen," she added, elbow on the bar and fingers propped on her cheek.

Dazai's eyes slid over to her, squinting in the low light, a silent whisper of *drop it*.

Yosano sighed. "You know, we're regulars at a bar hidden in the alleyways where shadow deals go on downstairs," she said, swirling her drink. "Hell, most of us aren't even French- *we're* both ex-military members from Japan, one of the founders of this bar used to run a Japanese mafia, not to mention the sheer amount of, well, not-so-secret homosexuals; it's not like anyone's going to judge you for your *taste*."

Dazai set down his drink, staring into the half-empty glass at the amber pooling around the ice cubes. A flashback suddenly struck him, a memory of three friends who sat in a very similar bar, brothers-in-arms 'til the final gunshot, now one brother gone and the others dispersed like melting ice. (He was as diluted as his drink in the sweet sound of the music around him, watered down until all that remained was the bitterness of an empty heart-)

His fingers tightened around his glass. "Rats of the shadows indeed," he muttered bitterly, and Yosano peered at him oddly.

"Kunikida, I have three orders!" a voice shouted from behind them, and Dazai turned to see a lanky boy dressed in a white dress shirt and black vest similar to Kunikida's uniform come bobbing through the crowd, the flash of his earrings and the pin in his bright hair like a beacon.

"Something wrong, Tanizaki?" Yosano called as the boy made his way over with an empty tray. "You look quite frazzled."

Tanizaki flushed as he set the tray on the table. "The table I'm serving's full of... older women, and they kept, y'know..." he trailed off as he fiddled with the metal in his ear.

Dazai raised an eyebrow. "Hitting on you?" he filled in bluntly.

The blush on Tanizaki's pale skin darkened two-fold in confirmation, and Yosano snorted with laughter behind Dazai. "That's just 'cause you're adorable, sweetheart," she chirped. Poor Tanizaki squeaked at the comment, and Dazai felt a small smile prick at his lips.

(Tanizaki Jun'ichirou and his sister, Tanizaki Naomi were both part of the waitstaff of *La Chanson*, and were a few of the members who lived above the club. Tanizaki had an unfortunate curse when it came to female attention, including his overly and intently affectionate sister.)

"Well, don't just stand around with an order waiting," Kunikida barked, making Tanizaki jump. "What do you need?"

Tanizaki fumbled with the notepad tucked in his pants pocket, flipping it open. "Uhh, I need... oh shit, hang on, wrong page-" more flipping ensued, and Kunikida's eyebrow started to raise. "Um, I need a Southside but with *lemon* juice instead of lime, a Bee's knees, and uhh.... something kinda weird."

"Tanizaki." The word was low and irritated, and the tone made Tanizaki smile sheepishly. "Just spit it out."

"I'm sorry, Kunikida, it's just that... I've never heard of it," he explained, tugging nervously at his ear as he read from his notes. "From what I was able to catch, it's *non-alcoholic*, and I believe it's just ginger ale mixed with grenadine and a maraschino cherry?"

"Who would come to a club and not ask for booze?" Yosano muttered. Tanizaki shrugged as Kunikida got to work.

"Dunno. Said it was some kind of American drink- something called a 'Shirley Temple'?" Tanizaki said.

Yosano scrunched her nose. "It's sounds sordidly sweet, and you don't even get the buzz after!"

"That's what I said!" Tanizaki said. "But no, I double checked and this woman was really insistent on it. Said it was a 'new fad' or whatever."

Yosano scoffed. "I think it's ridiculous. Don't you agree, Dazai?" She asked, turning to face him after his lack of response. "Dazai."

(Dazai's eyes had glued themselves back to Chuuya, watching solely *him* as he finished his performance- he wasn't sure when they slid back over to the singer.)

"*Dazai.*"

"Hm, yes?" He was startled at realizing he'd been caught, but he softened his face into false confusion to throw her off.

(It didn't work.)

"And here I thought you said you weren't interested," she hummed as she put the pieces together.

Dazai hummed into the lip of his drink. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Yosano waved him off. "Fine, I'll let you stew in your denial," she said breezily. Dazai rolled his eyes.

"Um, am I missing something?" Tanizaki cut in as Kunikida slid the three drinks onto Tanizaki's tray.

"Work now, gossip later," Kunikida directed, and Tanizaki bustled off at the admonishment.

As his back faded into the crowd, the song ended with applause, and Dazai saw Chuuya bow and smile at the pit before stepping back up to the microphone. *"Thank you for the warm welcome,"* he started, and *oh my god his voice-* (it was lower than Dazai expected, and sharp edges of his Japanese dipped in the soft brush of delicate French.) *"As Edogawa said, I'll be a new performer here as of tonight."*

His introduction went on as he thanked the orchestra and the audience once again, but Dazai wasn't listening to the words, more focused on the shape of his lips as he spoke-

"So," Yosano said loudly, and Dazai flinched. She only smiled at him again before continuing. "Chuuya's a good friend of mine, and I pressed for him to perform here as he's been stuck looking for a job."

"I see," Dazai said curtly.

"While he was born in France, his father was Japanese and thus grew up with both heritages, but was... kicked out when he was young and ended up under the care of Ozaki Kouyou."

"Kouyou? Are you perhaps referring to Ougai's ex-wife?" Kunikida asked.

Yosano nodded. "Mhm, but it wasn't as if Mori was around to help, so it was pretty much just her when he was growing up."

Ah, that explains the Japanese ornamental touches. "Why was he kicked out?" Dazai said suddenly, and Yosano looked toward him in surprise before her face fell.

"I'm not sure; I've known him for a few years, but he still remains pretty lock-and-key about his past," she said sadly. "I only got the information I know because he's a horrible lightweight when it comes to wine."

Dazai choked. "Sorry?"

Yosano tapped her cheek in contemplation. "Yep. He can hold any other alcohol like a champ- I've seen the man down three shots of tequila and have a normal conversation, or another time he had four martinis without realizing it, but barely half a glass of wine and he's *out*." Yosano swept her hand out to emphasize the last word. "The funny thing is that wine happens to be his favorite, particularly those really bitter reds..." she trailed off in thought.

Dazai coughed. "What *else* do you know about him?" he tried subtly.

Dazai regretted his question when a horribly wicked grin crossed her face, and she tapped at her cheek in faux thought. "Well, he's extremely well-trained in martial arts and isn't afraid to use it, has an oddly violent affinity for hats, can sing classical opera, is about as old as you are, wears

makeup really well, is about twenty-one centimeters shorter than you, and can pull off a yukata *really* well," she listed victoriously.

Dazai gaped at her as stubborn red colored high on his cheekbones, dark enough that he couldn't blame it on the alcohol. Yosano's grin glittered in the low light of the bar.

Dazai quickly threw back the rest of his drink and stood up, snatching his (still-damp!) coat and gloves. "Good *night*, Yosano," he called before turning on his heel.

"*Dazai!* It's not even 10:30 yet!" she complained, but Dazai just waved her off.

"Oi! This is going on your tab!" Kunikida yelled after him, and Dazai turned around to lean his back into the door before waving sweetly at him.

Just as he was about to leave, he heard wolf whistles from a table of inebriated women (ironically the same table that had been tormenting Tanizaki), and looked up to see Chuuya wince at the attention, before his eyes looked to the back of the room where Dazai was standing, and locked with Dazai's.

A curious expression fluttered over Chuuya's face, bright and oddly open- *it wasn't acting*.

Dazai stiffened briefly before putting on the flirtiest of his smiles and pushing open the door.

He stalked home in the nasty slush with a pounding heartbeat and the words *Oh god, what am I going to do?* circling in his mind.
(*I'm so screwed.*)

Nakahara Chuuya was making his way through the back halls behind the stage toward the dressing rooms, the club long-dark after closing.

Coat draped over his arm and hat dangling from his fingers, Chuuya started to pluck at the buttons of his vest to loosen it as he turned the corner, passing an open door- one of the small lounges for performers- and catching a glimpse of the racket from inside.

"See, *that's* why you messed this part up- that's a sixteenth note, not a *grace note* you imbecile," a voice barked, annoyed.

Another voice scoffed. "This piece wasn't even that lock-step, and I thought it would help it flow better."

An irritated tongue click. "You're not supposed to *alter* the music, Nakajima; you're to play what's on the page and nothing more."

"But that's so *boring* and lifeless! Why don't you ever try to play how *you* want to?"

"Because *I* know that over-the-top theatrics will do nothing but ruin the piece."

"You-"

"*Oi*, don't you two start fighting," Chuuya called lazily as he stopped by the doorway. "I need both of you in order to perform, and *no one* can play if you punch each other's lights out."

In the room were two young men, one of which was leaning over the other's shoulder scowling at the sheet music in other's hand, and both looked seconds away from strangling the other, faces pulled taut in raw annoyance.

(The younger of the two was Nakajima Atsushi, the violinist from earlier that night, the paper in his hands crinkled as he scowled up at the other from his seat. The other- only two years older- was Akutagawa Ryuunosuke, older brother of cellist Akutagawa Gin as well as the other violinist at *La Chanson*.

While both were phenomenal musicians, they held a grudge for the other that burned hotter than any fire.

Akutagawa was the original violinist, but a year prior Atsushi had been taken in by Fukuzawa hungry, homeless, and half-dead. Akutagawa had been dismayed to know he was also a violinist like him if not *better*, but they clashed for the sole reason that Atsushi played with his heart strung across his violin while Akutagawa played as rigid as the stale paper that dictated him.

Soul and passion versus perfection and order- they were like oil and water mixed into a volatile cocktail of kerosene set aflame by a few well-placed words of a familiar person simply to keep himself entertained.)

"Sorry, Nakahara," Atsushi mumbled, scratching sheepishly at the back of his neck. Akutagawa mumbled the same under his breath.

Chuuya sighed, propping a hand on his hip. "I've told you both before, you can just call me 'Chuuya', please," he said, before pinching the bridge of his nose. "Lord, I'm only a few years older than you and you make me sound so *old*."

Atsushi flushed in embarrassment, waving his hands- and the crumpled paper in his fist frantically. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offense!"

Chuuya waved him off. "Stop apologizing, Atsushi, honestly," he said tiredly, and Atsushi froze. (Chuuya didn't miss the smirk Akutagawa shot at Atsushi.) "Both you and Gin played fantastically tonight and I wanted to thank you."

Atsushi beamed, and the boy damn near *glowed*. (Akutagawa on the other hand looked bitter.) "Thank you! I wanted to thank you as well for such an incredible performance," he bubbled. "I've never played with a male vocalist before!" Akutagawa glared at Atsushi.

Chuuya dipped his head with a small laugh. "Thank you, Atsushi," he said warmly, and turned to Akutagawa. "I look forward to performing with you as well, Akutagawa," he added, and Chuuya couldn't tell if he bristled or fluffed up at the comment.

"The notion is reciprocated," Akutagawa said stiffly, and Chuuya snorted at the phrasing.

"Get home safely, okay?" he nudged, and then looked over to Atsushi. "And don't fall asleep in the

lounge again, Atsushi; you have a room upstairs for a reason.”

Atsushi winced as Chuuya stepped out of the room, and he noticed that despite the animosity on Akutagawa's stiff features, his chest was still pressed against Atsushi's back. He smiled wryly at the observation as he made his way to his own dressing room.

Opening the door into the sparsely-decorated room, he sighed as he saw the person perched on the edge of his vanity with an old newspaper Chuuya had tossed aside earlier. "Akiko, I thought I told you that you can't come to my room without me escorting you," he scolded dryly, dropping the coat and his hat onto one of the chairs by the door before sitting down in the one across from her.

Yosano clicked her tongue, setting the newspaper on top of her lap. "Well, it's not *my* fault you disappear backstage before I can meet up you," she retorted, folding her hands over her lap.

Chuuya rolled his eyes. "That's beside the point."

She raised an eyebrow before leaning forward into the palm of her hand, eyes scrutinizing and playful. "How was your first performance?" she asked. "You seemed to get a fair amount of *attention* tonight."

Chuuya groaned as he slid down the back of his chair, shrugging out of his vest and undoing the top buttons of his shirt. "Don't remind me," he complained, and Yosano laughed.

"Well, you can't blame them," she said, flapping a hand at Chuuya as he pulled the pins from his hair and shook it loose. "Every woman goes crazy for a man who can clean up well."

Chuuya shot her a deadpan stare as he dropped the pins onto the vanity.

"Well?"

Chuuya didn't answer.

She sighed dramatically. "Alright, I realize that they're not quite the attention you're looking for-"

“*Akiko-*”

"-but you certainly were a big hit tonight, snagged heartstrings or not."

He digested her words as he combed out the tangles in his hair, eyes blankly trained on his reflection. "Although this wasn't truly the first time I've performed here- hell, I feel like I've known these people for *years* instead of a month," he started, "I still felt nervous singing for a full audience- a *true* audience."

Yosano gave him a small smile. "I know, Chuuya dear," she said gently, "but you were incredible as usual."

Chuuya pinked at the praise. "You know I'm not-"

"Don't start with the self-deprecating shit tonight after you blew away the club," she interrupted, and Chuuya's eyes flicked over to her.

"Y'know, for a woman of your elegance you *certainly* have quite the harsh tongue," he quipped disapprovingly.

She shrugged helplessly. "That's what happens when you're surrounded by soldiers weak with pain- they cuss," she replied simply.

"I forget quite frequently that you used to be a *nurse* with that malicious streak of yours," Chuuya dryly drawled, and Yosano chimed a bright laugh.

They sat in companionable silence as Chuuya finished removing his show makeup, the peace briefly shattered by an odd interruption of loud "Good *night's*" shouted from outside the door by Atsushi and Akutagawa, and Chuuya snorted at the clash of dry, angry tone and pleasantry.

Yosano quirked an eyebrow with an amused twist of the lips. "Those two still goin' after each other, huh?"

Chuuya looked her dead in the eye. "I stopped them earlier from a fist-fight over a *sixteenth note*," he said, voice level in annoyance. "They're absolutely ridiculous."

"Well then, I'm going to alter my bet to less than two months," she hummed, and Chuuya raised an eyebrow.

"You can't be serious."

"You've seen those two more than I have, don't you think there's some underlying *sexual tension* under all of that feud?" she nagged, and Chuuya leveled a look at her.

"Don't be absurd, Akiko," he chided. "Just because *you* seem to find ridiculous romance wherever you go doesn't mean it's sincere."

She shrugged. "Then I know who's going to be buying a round of drinks when those two finally start going at it," she said bluntly, the phrasing making Chuuya choke.

"You really should act more like a lady of *this* time," he groaned.

"Hm, I don't think so," she said, tapping her chin. "It's simply too *stuffy*."

(Chuuya knew he shouldn't bother pressing the subject.)

"Speaking of romance," she started abruptly, "how is yours going?"

Chuuya froze. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

He sighed. "Akiko, there is no and will *never be a romance*," he bit out, words more tired than angry. (It *was* almost two in the morning, after all.)

"Are you sure?" she double-checked, words sly.

"Absolutely."

"Hm, that's good then, as I have a friend of mine who seemed rather... *invested* in your performance."

Chuuya sighed heavily as he pushed out of his seat. "You can tell her I'm not interested," he said sharply.

"Not a *her*." The words rang loudly, victoriously, and Chuuya froze, eyes widening just a fraction as his mind briefly flit to a pair of dark eyes and darker hair smudged by the lights of stage, a smile stretched across the darkness of the back of the bar that had made his stomach drop, and-

"*No*." The word was resolute, but the sound drew fish hooks across Chuuya's stomach as a flush of fear and self-disgust roiled through him. *No. No no. It's not right. It's not normal-*

"Chuuya," Yosano said suddenly, sliding off of the counter to stand behind him, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. "You're allowed a chance of the heart as any other person."

Chuuya shook his head. "No, not me." The response was near-whispered, barely a sound in the silence.

Yosano frowned. "Chuuya-"

He whirled around to face her, and despite his small stature that stood noticeable inches shorter than Yosano, his presence swallowed the gaps of the room. (Trembling terror hid under false rage and bravado- the only façade he knew.) "*Don't* mess around in my love life, Akiko," he spit sharply, and he saw her eyes widen at the venom.

"But-"

"*Don't*. Please." His voice cracked, and he winced at himself.

Yosano cocked her head and propped a hand on her hip. "I've said it before and I'll say it again- there's nothing wrong in being different, and said differences do *not* ordain what makes you *happy*."

Chuuya sucked in a deep breath, stuck between irritation and sadness. *I know she's right, but...*

Yosano sighed, removing her hand and caging her face dramatically as she shook her head. "Y'know, I just gave him a similar speech earlier today," she lamented. (As if a switch had been flipped, her words and attitude changed the sticky, sickly molasses of the poisonous dread he'd submerged them in into something much lighter, and he breathed a sigh of relief.)

Chuuya knit his eyes eyebrows. "He who?"

Yosano dropped her hand to give him a Cheshire smile. "The person *I* think is going to be your perfect match," she declared.

He huffed and spun back around, tossing a "Goodnight, Akiko," over his shoulder as he hurried out before she could say anything else.

"Even that! I mean c'mon, he did the *same* thing earlier!"

"Go home!"

"Fine!"

Chuuya laughed under his breath as he wound his way out of the club, but the memory of her words and those dark eyes backlit by the light of a glass door haunted him.

What a spider's web that woman has dragged me into.

Eventually (inevitably), a rhythm started to emerge, subtly but surely: on nights where Nakahara Chuuya performed, there was always a silent observer watching from the corner of his eyes and a forgotten drink in his hand, always the second seat to the left at the bar.

Silent he was indeed, as well as unnoticed by the subject of observation-

But not by his companions.

"Dazai, come *on* , it's been almost a *month!*"

"Yosano dear, you know that pushing nonexistent buttons gets you nowhere."

Yosano groaned as she turned back toward the bar to pull her glass toward her- this time her gin mixed with club soda as opposed to her usual simple syrup fix- rolling -her eyes in irritation. "Just give it up, honey, you're obviously attracted but too damn freaked out to actually try," she snarked.

Kunikida cracked a faint smile, but Dazai didn't reply. "Even I can attest to your infatuation, Dazai," he added, tucking the ice bucket back into the cooler by his feet.

Once again, Dazai didn't reply, and was too busy absently staring at the stage where Chuuya was finishing up his performance of the night, fingers drumming against his glass.

Yosano shot him a sharp glare. "See look, he's not even paying attention! *Again!*"

Dazai turned faintly back to face Yosano with a tight, yet somehow weary expression on his face before he silently settled his head into his arms atop the surface of the bar.

Yosano raised her eyebrows at his reaction just as another body slid smoothly into the seat next to Dazai. Eyes meeting the new arrival's, she laughed lowly before sipping at her drink. "You're about to get cornered, Dazai," she warned, voice faintly tinged in amusement as she waved a hello to Edogawa Ranpo.

"Been awhile since I popped over to visit you guys, huh?" Ranpo said cheerily, seemingly oblivious to the irritated sigh from Dazai, whose face remained planted in his arms.

"Indeed it has, Ranpo," Kunikida greeted, and Ranpo beamed at him. "I take it you want your usual?" he asked, and Ranpo nodded as Kunikida got to work.

"Now," Ranpo started, swinging around in his seat to face Dazai and Yosano, steepling his fingers. "Does someone care to explain why Dazai's got his face buried in Kunikida's precious bar?"

"Nothing more than him simply being obtuse," Yosano said cheerfully, her response so sugary as it was deadly that Dazai didn't know whether to laugh or shrink away. He settled for petulantly turning his head away from her.

Ranpo chuckled as he reached for the glass Kunikida handed him, a mix of something sickly sweet and bubbly with a wedge of pineapple adorning it. "Well now, there's actually something to shut the ever-loquacious Dazai Osamu up?" he hummed, fingers gently plucking the fruit from the sugared rim without looking at Dazai.

Dazai lifted his head to prop his chin on his arms, one hand reaching out to toy at the edge of his glass. "It's nothing of import, I assure you," he answered smoothly, trying to use the feeling of cool glass under his fingers to halt the stuttering heartbeat under his sternum. "Though I must ask- aren't you to be announcing the performers setting up on stage now?"

Dazai thought saw something curious click in Ranpo's expression, but he turned to look at the stage nonetheless. "Ah, nope," Ranpo chirped brightly, lifting the drink to his lips. "They're just providing background music as opposed to a full performance, so there's no need."

Dazai's eyes flicked over to see both Akutagawas on stage tonight; he was dressed in dark navy evening suit cut high over a vest that spread into pointed tails, the dark fabric of his pants pulling in different directions as he kept shifting, fidgeting with the music stand in front of him, while Gin was dressed in the same shade of dark blue, her dress fluid enough to pool around the sides of her cello as her fingers fiddled at the neck of it as she tuned it gently, her dark hair free as it spilled over her shoulder in perfect waves. (Both siblings held the air of effortless but dangerous grace, their beauty knife-sharp and elegant, though Gin was much more gentle than her razor-spined brother.)

As if summoned by Dazai's attention, they both began to play a simple duet that chimed and swirled over the other, the sweetly high notes of his violin like gulls fluttering in spots of heartbeats over the rushing and slow elegance of her cello, their sound enrapturing but just numbing enough to hum in the space between people talking and chattering- a quiet ghost that filled the maw of the

room, a pair of effortless crows set aflight on a misty night of the bitter winter.

Dazai huffed quietly to himself as he watched them play, watching as Akutagawa's eyes skipped incessantly over the lines in front of him without ever looking up. *There's no doubt he's an incredible player, but he's just.... lacks the passion, that color*, Dazai thought. *Passion and fire, he needs, almost like Chu-* his eyes went wide at the his train of thought, and he silently groaned before turning away from the stage. (He didn't see Ranpo noticing his expression, the man for once more open in his face than he realized as Ranpo followed Dazai's thought process.)

"Obtuse, you say," Ranpo mused, peering over at Yosano. "Yosano my friend, I'm thinking you may be mistaken."

Yosano rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean, Ranpo," she fired back.

Dazai sat back up with a grunt, rolling out the stiffness of his neck. "Contrary to what you may be thinking, I do happen to possess the ability to hear, you two," he said sarcastically.

"Your point?" Yosano added.

Dazai shrugged. "While you keep pressing a gossip point that *doesn't* exist, why don't you try prying at something of actual substance, such as Kunikida's odd protectiveness of his bar, or...." he paused, firing Ranpo a deadly grin that curled on his face. "Perhaps Ranpo's infatuation with a certain *pianist*?"

Ranpo's fingers stopped fiddling, body going just still enough in reaction to Dazai's provocation. Yosano barked a laugh.

Dazai's grin widened as he leaned an elbow on the bar, peering over at Ranpo. "You two claim to be rivals despite your 'retiring' from the piano, yet no one can miss the saccharine attention you give him," he purred.

A smile quirked at the corner of Ranpo's lips as he took a sip from his glass, eyes not moving from the surface of the bar. "Perhaps," he started, voice towering yet unabashed. "Yet, you aren't subtle either, as the entirety of this visit stems from the fact you're always here watching a certain *someone* every night like clockwork." Ranpo tilted his head back to look over at Dazai, glittering green shining sharply through dark strands of hair in mischievous jubilation. "I got curious, wondering if my eyes truly deceived me, and I'm delighted to see that they weren't."

(Dazai was sure that smile was going to be burnt into his mind as his own smile dropped. *Am I really that transparent?*)

With that, Ranpo slid off his seat and bowed a cheery goodbye. "I wish you the best of luck, Dazai," he said brightly, the tan of his jacket fluttering over his charcoal vest before he spun back around, skipping through the crowd.

"Have fun with your pianist, Ranpo!" Yosano shouted after him, and Ranpo fired back a mega-watt smile before slipping into the aisle, invisible amongst the crowd. (*Damn that man's perceptiveness.*)

Yosano turned her deadly smile back onto Dazai, to which Dazai merely raised an eyebrow in response, futilely trying to will away the mortification churning in his stomach. "Now, what did I tell you?" she snarked.

Dazai rolled his eyes. "Nothing of substance."

She sighed. "It's not my fault your stubborn pride is getting in the way," she said, and Dazai started to drum his fingers against the side of his glass. "Which means that because of said pride, I'll never be able to coerce you into just walking up and introducing yourself-"

Dazai blanched. "Yosano, you know I can't just do something like that," he hissed, but she held out a hand to stop him.

"-so start small," she finished, her face shifting into something softer.

Dazai paused, fingers settled back onto the surface of the table. "What do you mean?"

She leaned into the palm of her hand, the black of her gloves stark against her pale face. "When it comes to women, you seem to have no problem inserting yourself into situations where you're not wanted-"

"Hey!"

"-and turning on the charisma like it's second nature, yet you remain so horribly and uncharacteristically bashful when it comes to *Chuuya*," she continued.

He tried to silently hush her, but she only latched onto his obvious discomfort, red-hot and burning as it crawled up his spine.

"By this point, if it was a woman you'd be *all* over her, yet here you are, sitting petulantly in the back of the club pining from a distance like a pathetic teenager," she pressed, the Cheshire smile on her face only sharpening as he shot her a glare, too tired to try and refute. "So I suggest something *small*- like a letter."

He tilted his head in confusion. "A letter?"

She nodded. "Something simple but with intent, just to test the waters," she explained. "But something.... privately personal, yeah?"

A letter? But something like that seems so... trite, unnoticeable.

"Are you suggesting a letter of *secret admiration*?" Dazai asked dryly, and his fingers were on the move again, this time plucking at the buttons of his vest. His words were hesitant and barely voiced, as if he was almost afraid of their syllables and what those syllables meant.

A bright smile lit up Yosano's face. "Exactly!" she chirped, but the light response only hammered nails into Dazai's ribcage in apprehension.

Yosano clicked her tongue. "Come on, don't give me that face," she scolded. "You look like I'm making you get up on that stage and confess your undying love or something."

He winced. "If I do try and go through with this," he started hesitantly, "then... how are you sure he has the same, well, *interests*?"

She snorted at his poor phrasing, the words clumsy and off-kilter. "Just trust me," she insisted, and Dazai could feel the final meek crumbs of his prideful façade finally fall around his feet.

Nowhere to hide.

He rolled his resignation between his teeth like burning embers, gnawing on his lower lip before breathing slowly from his nose. "Fine."

"Bout damn time," she said, and Kunikida gave her a chiding look at her language.

Dazai snorted, reaching out to snatch at his glass, swirling the liquid in it dramatically. "I'll show you what I can do with that *stubborn pride of mine*," he declared loftily, trying to rebuild his crumbling walls with a sly smile.

Yosano leaned over and pat his hand gently, sarcastically. "Don't hurt yourself dear," she teased, and he clicked his tongue. "And don't you dare hurt *Chuuya* either," she warned, her tone suddenly going cold and protective.

He raised his glass in a mock salute, ignoring her hostility. "Will do," he retorted dryly, before draining the entirety of its contents before he could regret it, much like his foolish decision.

It's just something silly that'll burn out like flash paper- just play along and let it fade.

(However, his infatuation was only the precursor to him falling further than he could have guessed.)

A week later- another *exhausting week* of performances and unwanted affection- and Chuuya was ready to collapse or fall asleep on his feet. It was Friday night, and he wanted nothing more than to get home and get into bed, knowing he wouldn't have to go in that weekend, letting the other singer perform (she was the weekend special this time around), and he wasn't guilty to admit he was relieved.

Trudging down the hall, he heard a ruckus from the lounge as he passed it, and decided solidly *Hell no, not today*, as he hurried by. Having performed a jazzier piece with the brass members tonight, he hadn't had a chance to see how Atsushi and Akutagawa were behaving, but he was too tired to try and bother with them tonight.

Nudging over the door with his foot, he was met face to face with Yosano once again, and should he have been in a conscious state of mind he would have screamed; instead, he chose to just stare blankly at her. "Akiko, please don't make me repeat myself," he said tiredly. "I'm frankly too exhausted tonight."

"Relax hon, I'm only here to deliver something to you before heading out for the night," she answered, and he looked at her in confusion.

"Huh?"

She grinned, but even the edges of her smile were pulled in strings of sleep. "You've got a secret admirer," she said simply, her words amused and knowing in some fashion.

He raised an eyebrow and cocked a hip in dissatisfaction. "A *what*?" he asked dryly, and she

smirked at him.

"You heard me," she said, walking forward to press the envelope into his hand. "Do try and read it; I'm thinking he may not appreciate being downturned immediately," she called breezily as she walked past him, fluttering her fingers in a dainty goodbye before shutting the door behind her.

Chuuya was confused, for lack of a better term, and the molasses of exhaustion made the gears of his mind slow to a bare hum. *What in god's name?*

He thumbed the letter in his hand and held it up to examine it, scrutinizing the plain paper addressed with nothing more than a simply penned "C".

He had half a mind to just dispose of it, for the very idea of receiving a love letter made his insides squirm uncomfortably, but his mind caught on what Yosano had said before she left- *He may not appreciate being downturned immediately.*

He?

Chuuya had undeniably and irritatingly become a popular favorite of the women who visited *La Chanson*, and their overt affection did nothing but make him uncomfortable to the point where he tried to vacate the stage as quickly as possible before someone tried to jump him (which nearly happened once, but Gin had actually staved the madwoman off with nothing more than a glare that could scrape the shadows from the moon.)

But this was a letter delivered from Yosano, someone he *trusted*, and while she could be devious, no doubt, she always had Chuuya's best interest in mind. (*Just start small*, a voice quite like hers nudged in his mind.)

"Oh what the hell," Chuuya muttered, and he tugged off one of his gloves to slide his nail under the seal, carefully popping it open to find a similarly unadorned piece of parchment carefully folded inside it.

Opening the sheet, he saw that it was filled with simple but small, blocky writing in plain black ink with a message, and, upon carefully lifting it to his nose, detected something perfuming the paper- *Pine?*

"Though you may not know me, I know you. From a distance I see you, hidden as a ghost in the shadows of this club much like a rat in city sewers. You do not see me- never have seen me- but I see you, a bright spot in the misery of the poisonous cycle of existence. Simply put, you intrigue me, but I care not to define for you the depth. I will remain a hidden affection, a hidden interest, for my very words of this manner are.... unconventional, shall I say, and shall remain anonymous for the time being with no presence but my words. Know that I may be here, silently watching, silently appreciating.

-A. plicatum "

Careful, formal, nothing obscenely overbearing or intrusive; the words were more of a introduction, testing the waters, a tentative handshake without staking a claim. Forward? Perhaps, but nothing uncomfortably so; the words were carefully crafted yet still elegant, and Chuuya was surprised.

Over and over he read them, letting them sink into his skin like bright paints as his mind whirled in indecisiveness- should he write back, or let it be? (His heart stuck on the sweet words of *simply put, you intrigue me*, coating it the brightest reds he could envision.)

Tapping against the paper, he pulled it entirely out of the envelope to set the latter aside when the edge caught on something that had been attached to the bottom of the paper near the end: wrapped carefully in twine were a few sprigs of something bright and warmly golden that grew in little dots of color, and they smelled faintly sweet.

Chuuya ran his finger down one of the stems curiously, his eyes catching on the odd signature in realization when the sound of his door opening interrupted him.

Whipping around (more sharply than he'd like to admit), he froze when he saw who was standing sheepishly in his doorway.

"Um, Nakahara..." Akutagawa started hesitantly, but Chuuya's eyes were focused less on his words and more on *him*, for from head to toe he was covered in white, dusty powder that was even crusted stickily into his hair and fell to the ground like sun motes- *rosin*.

"No, absolutely not," Chuuya deadpanned, and Akutagawa went rigid. "You know where the cleaning supplies are."

Akutagawa nodded stiffly at the admonishment and started to walk out, when a loud voice yelled "See? I *told* you he wouldn't help!" from down the hall.

"It was *your* fault we're even like this in the *first place*, Nakajima!" he snarled back as he stalked out, and Chuuya resisted the urge to snort as he heard their bickering rattle the walls.

It certainly wasn't the first time they'd ended up making a mess and it definitely wouldn't be the last, but Chuuya was surprised to find they'd upgraded to rosin, and shuddered at the idea of trying to scrub it all out from his own hair.

His fingers crinkled the paper in his hands, drawing his attention back to its mystery. He was curious, to say the least, but he was also hesitant, and yet... *It's not like I have anything to lose, right?*

He instantly heard a sharp voice that wasn't his own screech at him in his head, warning him it *wasn't right*, but he just shook his head and carefully tossed the letter on his vanity. "It's not like she can stop me now from something so harmless," he muttered, before gathering his stuff and heading out, trying to formulate a reply to the letter.

As he passed the lounge on the way out, he cringed when he saw how much of it was coated in the dust, like a mockery of the winter outside but five times as hard to clean. "If you pour that on first it'll just make it stick!" Atsushi hissed, and Akutagawa clicked his tongue.

"I *know* what I'm doing," he threw back. "After all, if *you* hadn't acted like a *child* than we wouldn't even have to do this."

Atsushi scoffed. "*Me?* What about *you*, mister 'I must remain perfectly composed at every single moment even when I'm asleep'?"

Chuuya cut off any retort by calling a light "Play nice, boys," as he passed the doorway, and heard Atsushi squeak in surprise, making Chuuya chuckle before he pushed the door open into the back alley of *La Chanson* into the bitterly cold night.

Start simple? I think... I think I can do that, were the thoughts that accompanied him home, his mind full of unsaid words and his fingers itching for a pen. (And a heart that beat uncertainly.)

(That night, with his fingers trailing over the weathered pages of an old apothecary book from the library, Chuuya searched blandly through the lists upon lists upon lists of herbs and flowers until his eyes caught on the familiar Latin in old, spidery handwriting under a gorgeously hand-inked image of the shrub blossoms.

"Formal name: *A. plicatum*

Common name: *Acacia*

Uses: *used in basic cake baking and breads, ointments for hemorrhoids, and other waterproof adhesives"*

Chuuya scrunched his nose at the uses, but his heart stopped as he read the tiny note scrawled near the bottom:

"In the Victorian dictionary of flowers, Acacia blossoms are typically used to represent hidden or concealed love and affection, typically the popular choice of a secret admirer."

Chuuya choked, and then slammed the book shut.)

With the end of the week and start of nights filled with bleary memories hazy in bright lights and the bitter taste of alcohol, Dazai was back in his usual seat, this time nursing petulant disappointment masked in the positively shit-eating grin he was aiming at Kunikida, Yosano laughing into the rim of her own drink as she watched the two.

The source of the chaos was the discovery that Nakahara Chuuya would not be performing for the entirety of the weekend, as *La Chanson du Noir* was hosting a popular gentlemen's club singer named Sasaki Nobuko, a woman with hair darker than obsidian, eyes the color of the spring sky, and more curves than the edges of an hourglass. Behind her was the jazz trio lifting her sound higher above the heads of the crowd, with Miyazawa Kenji's low notes of his bass (despite it being twice his size) paired with the shining brass notes of Tachihara Michizou on the trumpet and Hirotsu Ryuurou on the trombone, all four of them creating a maelstrom of ringing sound that filled the room in pure, cacophonous, *jazz*.

While Dazai did admit that she was in fact quite beautiful- her voice like crystal silk and her dress black-violet- he felt no desire to pursue her, as she was naught but a flame compared to the usual sun that graced that stage.

(Yes, she was gorgeous.

Yes, her voice was as enthralling as her body.

Yes, Dazai noticed.

But she wasn't *Chuuya*.)

Dazai was able to mostly keep the spite out of his smile with drink after drink to hide it in, tucking away his heart from the teasing of Yosano, but Kunikida, on the other hand, was not as lucky in his own endeavors of concealing his embarrassment.

“Someone *actually* managed to catch the eye of the ever-stoic Kunikida Doppo?” Yosano trilled impishly.

Kunikida turned to her, raising a stern eyebrow in disapproval. “Don’t be ridiculous, Yosano,” he chided, but his attempts at deflection fell.

Upon entering, Dazai found Kunikida *keenly* watching Ms. Sasaki as she performed, hands frozen despite there being a half-cleaned glass in them, and Dazai had latched onto it him faster than a shark to blood (and was quickly joined by Yosano).

“She *is* quite the specimen, Kunikida,” Dazai chimed in, the corners of his impish smile only spreading further, his foot tapping absently to the beat of Sasaki’s song as she performed, her words a gentle caress at the back of the mind.

Dazai was delighted to see his comment spread pink to Kunikida’s face, ending in a hilarious juxtaposition of irritation and embarrassment. “Women are *not* objects, I should remind you,” Kunikida tried, his words clipped a little too closely to maintain composure.

Dazai shrugged dramatically, before lazily gesturing towards the woman in question. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, huh?” he teased, biting back a laugh as Kunikida glared at him.

“Don’t be lewd, Dazai,” he scorned, arms crossing over his chest so his fingers could tap irritably against them.

Yosano snorted. “Well, Dazai *would* know a fine specimen as he saw them, considering he’s got his eye on a rather *fine* prize after all,” she interjected sarcastically, making the smile on Dazai’s face freeze. “What? Don’t tell me I’m wrong.”

Thankfully, Dazai was spared from responding when Tanizaki stumbled his way toward the bar with a chattering dark-haired girl hanging off of him despite his meek attempts to shake her off.

“Still can’t catch a break, Tanizaki?” Yosano called, and Tanizaki gave her a withering look as the girl squeezed him tighter, making him wince.

“Do you two have any orders for me, or are you just horsing around?” Kunikida scolded, earning apologetic smiles from both of them, but they did not separate.

“I saw big brother getting bullied by the table he was serving and I just *had* to help him,” the girl pouted, nuzzling further into Tanizaki, much to his disturbance.

“Naomi, *please*, not here,” Tanizaki pleaded, trying to subtly extricate himself from her unsuccessfully as he struggled to set his tray on the bar.

She pouted but ceded somewhat, loosening her grip on him just enough to let him stand straight, settling on just slipping her arms solidly around his bicep. No longer pressed against her brother, Tanizaki Naomi stood about a head shorter than Jun’ichirou, but instead of his light eyes and soft red hair she had long, straight black locks that fell to her ribs and bright blue eyes. She was also dressed in the similar style wait staff uniform as Kunikida and Tanizaki: a cleanly pressed white blouse tucked into a black skirt and neat black heels.

(They certainly did *not* look related in any fashion, and Naomi used it fully to her advantage; the one rule among those who knew them was ‘*Do not question the relationship of the Tanizaki siblings.*’)

Tanizaki huffed, his face tired as Naomi hummed. “I need a flight of beer,” he relayed, chiding Naomi as she tugged on his arm suddenly, nearly making them both trip.

Dazai snorted as he watched them, leaning against the bar with his elbow digging into the wood as he held his drink loosely in his hand. Yosano shot him a look, and they shared a faint smile between them as the two siblings kept bickering (though it was mostly Juni’ichirou being vocal).

Kunikida, who finally tore his eyes away from the performance, searched for one of the flight boards before preparing the glasses effortlessly, and Dazai watched his fingers flutter from spout to spout. Losing interest, he let out a deep breath through his nose as his eyes slid back to the stage just as the present song ended.

Sasaki stood silently, waiting for the band to prepare as they shifted in their seats and flipped through their music. She took a deep breath, drawing a hand through her hair so that it shone darkly in the lights. Despite the glitz and glamour she was dressed in or the notes that spiraled from her lips, her face didn't seem to change; Dazai found it unnerving. She looked as if she didn't enjoy it in any fashion, or feel any of the music at *all*, singing as if it was a chore, a passive job, and Dazai didn't understand.

Even Akutagawa, who followed the line down to the last natural scrawled on the page still *felt*, and everyone who listened could tell. But Sasaki? Next to Atsushi and Gin, or the cheerful Kenji and his giant, elegant bass, or Edgar Allan Poe, who played sweet sonatas on glittering keys of ivory (*Or Chuuya-*), she seemed like an automaton, a homunculus, playing along as if it was simply her duty.

Pretty face, no heart, Dazai deduced, taking an uninterested sip of his drink as he listened blandly to the start of the next song.

"Doesn't she seem kinda lifeless?" Yosano whispered to him, staying out of earshot of Kunikida, who was helping Tanizaki load the hefty flight onto his tray, while Naomi was doing her best to remain latched onto him.

Dazai blinked, before shaking his head with a quiet snort. "You read my mind," he mumbled back, and she shot him a grin.

"Considering how often you watch the performers, it wasn't that hard of a conclusion to reach," she said, tugging absently at her glove, "after all, you have a creepy people-reading sense."

He rolled his eyes. "I take offense at that comment; I'll have you know I'm a *fantastic* people-person," he quipped back, pressing a hand to his chest with a dramatic air that made Yosano raise a sarcastic eyebrow.

"Insufferable, perhaps," she said with a grin, and Dazai clicked his tongue.

“Don’t be rude, Yosano dear,” he said smoothly.

She gave him a deadly smile as she reached out to stir her drink with the toothpick in her drink. “I simply tell it as it is,” she started. “Shall I mention the fact that you have utterly failed to introduce yourself to the person who has you utterly enamoured like a fool?”

He flattened his lips into a sharp line before looking around her to watch the stage again. “That’s a different case,” he said airily. “I’m sure once he meets me I’ll be able to charm him easily.”

She scoffed at him. “He really isn’t one to be, well, *charmed*, I’ll have you know,” she said, “and if I can guess, I’m sure you two are going to bicker like oil and fire.”

He nodded slowly, sarcastically. “Don’t make assumptions, dear. And, to my knowledge, is the phrase not ‘oil and water’?”

The grin crept back onto her face, wide and strangely amused. “Oh sweetheart, you misunderstand; I know you, and I know him, and I know that you two aren’t just simply going to *disagree* like oil and water; no, he’s going to *hate* you, like you struck a match,” she enunciated, and for some reason, Dazai felt his heart twist sharply.

However, he kept the blasé attitude up, keeping a level smile. “And what do you possibly mean by that, *my dearest*?” he asked, lacing as much sardonicism in his endearment.

The knowing expression on her face only deepened, and it pissed Dazai off to no end; he couldn’t stand when he was on the other side of knowing something, the gullible, the played. “When he first meets you, he’s going to try punch your damn lights out because that’s just the way he is,” she explained, before her face softened, “but I also know his heart, and I know what kinds of people he works with.”

There was a tiny lift in his heart, small and nearly invisible. “Is that so?” he remarked casually. “Then why go through so much trouble just for me and this absurd cupid mission you’re on?”

“*Because* I know you both, and I can see the gaps you can fill in each other,” she replied cryptically, and Dazai snorted, faux-disinterested. “Though.... I’m *sure* you wouldn’t be the tiniest bit curious to see his reply since you’re so certain your personality is so *stunning*,” she continued, low and taunting, propping her chin in her palm.

He froze, fingers still and eyes flicking back toward her like needle-point. He ran his tongue over his teeth, contemplating a response; one one hand, he was curious to see his response, but on the other, he didn't want to give Yosano the satisfaction of rubbing it in his face.

He decided *to hell with my posterity* and sighed sharply, holding out a hand and opening his palm. She gave him a victorious smile and simply leaned back to watch him, and he resisted the urge to groan. Eventually, she reached inside her jacket pocket and extracted a small letter in a plain white envelope, holding out to him, which he pulled from her grasp with two elegant fingers. "You can't read it until I come back, so give me a second while I deal with that table," she said, holding up and index finger before gesturing behind them to point out the table ten seconds from a fist fight.

Funnily enough, Dazai hadn't even noticed.

Excusing herself, she dusted off her skirt before making her way over to them, light as a feather on her feet. From the looks of it, it seemed as if there was a standoff between two men, both obviously inebriated, and they were slinging insults at each other in sloppy French faster than Dazai could translate.

The letter in his hands went forgotten momentarily as he watched her stop by the table, and saw the words '*Please quiet down*' on her lips, but from the look on her face and both of their experiences combined, Dazai knew that wasn't going to work in the slightest.

The larger man, who had a shaved head of jet-black tattoos and a cheap suit, paused when she spoke, before a disgustingly pleased look crawled onto his face to reveal teeth of yellowed nicotine stains. He cooed something at her, and the other man promptly joined in, reaching toward her face, completely forgetting the argument they'd been having moments before.

It was when one of them whistled something obviously lewd that Dazai didn't catch that Yosano's air of politeness disappeared, and her hands curled into fists as dark anger twisted her features; he barely had time to catch her yelling a blunt "*Va te faire foutre!*" in their faces and promptly swinging a closed fist directly under his jaw.

Dazai's eyebrows rose in surprise at her choice in vulgarity, nodding slowly in approval as he turned back, ignoring the sounds of violence behind him as Yosano swiftly made work of them.

No one else paid them much mind, and the music continued without interruption.

"I must say, that certainly went well," he commented coolly without turning around as she sat back down beside him, tugging a loose strand of hair away from her face.

She gave him a wry laugh as she stretched her fingers, reaching out to crack each knuckle. “I’m nobody’s *whore*,” she said dryly, but there was enough venom laced behind her words to make her anger clear.

“Correct you are,” he said breezily as he looked down to examine the letter in his hands, flipping it over to the front to examine the neatly printed font there.

“Cher Fantôme”-

Dear Ghost.

Humming curiously, he tilted his head as he scrutinized the text, the small letters penned in two concise lines of perfect, but tiny cursive, scratched over the paper like it was done in a final resignation of ‘*I can’t believe this*’. Carefully, he turned it over to slide a thumb under the flap and pop it open, tugging out the sheet of paper adorned only in neat and impossibly straight lines of text written free-hand:

“well now, you seem to have put me at a disadvantage

have you not?

for you know who I am

but I am blind to you:

your face

name

eyes

yet you are able to watch me in turn

perhaps you are a ghost set to haunt me

perhaps I shall simply name you as such

granted you continue this cat & mouse game

of which I may be most fond.

- bien à vous, N. C.”

(Yours truly, N.C.)

“(i must say- a sprig of acacia? quite telling, o poltergeist.)”

It was an interesting style, nonetheless, but what struck Dazai stupidly breathless as he laughed incredulously was something he hadn't expected, studying the words over and over again; curious yet guarded, willing but cautious- he was simply intriguing in words as he was on stage.

“Interesting,” he mused, and Yosano gave him a look.

“What is it?” she asked, trying to peer over his shoulder.

He folded it back over away from her eyes, just subtly enough to send the message through and earning an angry squint. “You didn't tell me I'd be competing with a *poet*,” he said, lifting the paper in emphasis.

She knit her eyebrows. “Is that so?” she said, surprised. “I had no idea.”

Dazai only faintly heard the dredges of her words, could taste the diluted alcohol on his tongue and the fading music of the band between his teeth, but his mind was already thinking of a reply, a chess move, a step forward, a parry or a strike-

His mind was starving, and his heart decided to hide its loneliness under his curiosity.

Oh, what do you have in store for me, dear Chuuya?

(Dazai pretended not to sulk as Sasaki continued to sing for the rest of the weekend, the stage devoid of any air of the phoenix-flame he was quickly becoming so fond of.

Damn my heart.)

With work stealing Dazai's leisure time away from *La Chanson du Noir*, he spent night upon night getting late calls to finish shifts of other employee's gone away for the coming holidays, and he was tired to the bone. Finally, however, late that thursday night, he finally had enough of a break to stumble into the bar half-frozen, shivering as he made his way through the crowd to plop down in his usual seat by the bar.

Yosano, already in her usual spot, turned to watch as Dazai rubbed at his arms incredulously. “Well well well, finally returned, hm?” she asked, equal parts concerned as she was amused.

He shot her a faint look before shaking his head, pulling his coat around him with a shudder. “I don’t need your lip, sweetheart,” he scolded, and she scoffed. “Work was hell, and it all got dumped on me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Stop your whining and order somethin’ to warm you up,” she said, knocking on the bartop to get Kunikida’s attention from where he was talking with a couple on the opposite side. “Oi, the mummy’s back!”

Kunikida held up a finger in apology before making his way over, earning a sarcastic wave from Dazai as he tried to pretend his teeth weren’t chattering. Kunikida raised an eyebrow before sighing and reaching for a cup. “I’m not even to bother asking what mess you’ve gotten yourself into this time,” he said tiredly as he reached for something underneath the cabinets, then placing the (steaming?) cup in front of Dazai.

Dazai knit his eyebrows as he leaned forward to peer into the mug, frowning as he looked back up at Kunikida. “This isn’t my whiskey,” he complained.

Kunikida crossed his arms. “Your lips are nearly blue, Dazai,” he said bluntly, and Dazai blinked, absently touching a hand to them. “I’m not going to let you just die of frostbite on my bar; drink your coffee, and then you get your alcohol.”

Dazai paused before he gasped dramatically, pressing a hand to his chest with a dawning smile on his face. “*Kunikida*, you really *do* care for me?” he asked, sugary and childlike.

Yosano burst out laughing as Kunikida’s eyebrow twitched, Dazai leaning forward expectantly.

Kunikida clicked his tongue, shifting his weight in irritation. “Drink it and shut up,” he barked, and Dazai saluted obediently.

“Aye-aye, sir!” he cheered, and Kunikida rolled his eyes so sharply that Dazai nearly broke his persona of foolishness at Kunikida’s face as well as at his genuine concern, but reached for the warm cup anyway, inhaling the scent of cheap coffee before taking a sip.

While focused on his drink, Yosano turned to him, leaning on the counter with a knowing look. “So, how was the deprivation of your favorite source of music this week?” she asked teasingly, and his eyes flicked over to her.

Humming a laugh, he set the cup down before closing his eyes, feeling his chest warm just slightly. “How are Atsushi and Akutagawa doing, then?” he replied, purposefully evasive.

She sighed deeply, and he opened his eyes to see her pressing a hand into her face tiredly. “You’re insufferable,” she complained, and he shrugged. “But to answer your question, they happen to have a duet today, in addition to another performance by our favorite redhead.” She dropped her hand to give him a level look, a dangerous curl to her lips.

He blew a deep breath from his nose as he turned to look at her, propping his hands on his knee. “Yosano dear, please,” he tried, but even he felt the edges of exhaustion pulling at his patience.

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “Testy, today?” she said, and Dazai huffed. “Well, then I guess it’s time to unwind.”

Dazai’s mind immediately flickered back to the pages upon pages of letters after letters that had kept him up long into the night, trying to perfectly write a response to Chuuya’s reply, trying to *unwind* after work with a pen in his hand and ink smeared over his fingers and his cheek. “Perhaps so,” he agreed absently, reaching back for his coffee and trying to will away the headache pounding in his temples.

Shutting his eyes once more, he let the world around him fade away until all he could do was listen, the sounds narrowing into hazy shapes of amber as people talked, a mishmash of French and Japanese as glasses clinked beneath the low, private murmur of conversation. He could feel the shapes of the people shifting and blurring behind him, could feel Yosano seated beside him and Kunikida talking once more with the people at the bar. He took in a deep breath and focused on the smell of must and sweat and alcohol and perfume curling in the air, and tightened his fingers around his mug.

In the same thought, he released the breath in a low hiss, slowly opening his eyes to see Yosano giving him a concerned look. “Are you alright, Dazai?” she asked, no ounce of teasing evident. “Are you really not feeling well?”

He snorted, and waved her off. “I’m quite alright, don’t you worry,” he placated, and she squinted

dubiously at him. "I'm just tired, honestly; I wasn't kidding when I said work was rough lately."

She screwed her lips to the side for a second before sighing. "Well, if you insist," she ceded, "but if there's anything the matter, don't hesitate to tell me, okay?"

He nodded, before pausing. "Ah, well, since I'm here and in the same vein of thought, I have this for you," he said soberly, patting down his pockets until he found the letter half-sealed due to exhaustion and sliding it over to her, not meeting her eyes.

She blinked, before picking it up to scrutinize it, side-eying Dazai with a faint smile before quietly tucking it into her own pocket. "I won't press today, sweetheart," she said lightly, and he raised his cup in a faint salute of thanks.

She snorted, before turning toward the aisle of the club to see someone rushing toward them, sliding in next to Yosano with shortness of breath, obviously frazzled. "Kunikida, I need a shot of something, *quick*," the boy breathed, and Dazai leaned around Yosano to wave at him.

"Atsushi! Nice to see you," he called brightly, and Atsushi jumped, placing a hand to his chest to calm his breathing before letting out his breath in relief as he saw who it was.

"God, Dazai, don't *do* that," he complained as Kunikida slid a small glass of something clear toward him. Atsushi gave him a grateful smile.

"You alright, honey?" Yosano asked, slightly surprised as Atsushi immediately threw the shot back, wincing at the taste. "Don't you have a show to be preparing for?"

Atsushi made a noise of irritation low in his throat, something akin to a growl and a groan. "Yeah, but not until later," he started, eyes focused on the glass in his hand. "Akutagawa's up with Naka-*Chuuya*- need to get used to that- first, and then I play with him next, but he's been really annoyingly *touchy* lately and it's driving me up the damn wall." He set the glass down with far more force than necessary, and immediately cringed at the sound.

Dazai felt a smile slip onto his face as he watched Atsushi's face twist in frustration as he got lost in his head, and Yosano gave him an amused look before turning back to Atsushi. "You two still fighting?" she asked, and he sighed, propping his head on his hands.

“He’s so damn uptight all the time, always ‘*Nakajima, that’s wrong*’ this, and ‘*You need to play what’s given*’ that, and I swear he goes out of his way just to purposely piss me off,” he lamented, gnawing bitterly at his lip before scoffing. “I know he hates me, but it’s just that... something seems worse than usual, and now he won’t even let me *try* and talk to him before he just does that whole scowling thing and leaves the second I walk in.”

Dazai raised an eyebrow. “So, he’s being more, hm, *dramatic* than usual?” he asked carefully.

Atsushi pursed his lips. “He’s a pain in the ass, that’s what he is, acting so high and mighty,” he said sharply. “He’s such an amazing musician, but he just plays so, so-” he gestured wildly, searching for a word- “*robotic*, always playing the page instead of the room.”

Yosano nodded, and Dazai saw her clear the amusement from her face to give Atsushi a look of concern. “He still hasn’t grown?” she asked, giving Dazai a faint look, which he only shrugged at.

Atsushi shook his head sharply. “No, which is why I’m so *frustrated*,” he bit out, dragging his hands through his already-messy hair. “I *know* he’s better than me, but he just holds himself back with the music and just uses it as a weapon instead of a gift; I thought we’d gotten a bit better as just kinda ignoring each other, but he just snapped at me one day and keeps getting irrationally angry at me for no reason...” He trailed off as he drifted into his memory, tapping his fingers absently against his lip.

“Have you tried just *talking* with him?” Yosano pressed, and Atsushi made a strangled noise.

“Are you kidding? He’d probably sneak into my room and strangle me in my sleep with his bow if I tried,” Atsushi said, horror on his face from the mere idea of it.

“And how would he know where your room is, Atsushi?” Yosano purred, the innuendo making Atsushi flush solid red.

“No, *no*- Yosano, it was just a figure of speech,” he babbled, and she laughed heartily as he flapped his hands at her. Dazai couldn’t help but chuckle as well, and Atsushi shot him a withering look and a “*Dazai!*” at him before they were interrupted by the lights dimming slightly.

Once again, Ranpo’s voice crackled through the speaker in effortless French as he announced the night’s feature act, and Dazai’s heart caught on the words *Nakahara Chuuya*, ignoring Yosano’s blatant telling expression.

Faint welcoming applause cued the appearance of the performers of the night: Akutagawa stared blankly into the audience at the sound of clapping, fidgeting in his seat beside where Chuuya stood, always dazzling as he waved. Tonight he was dressed in solid black, spare the vest he wore that matched his blood-red gloves, drawing dizzying lines as his fingers fluttered and jumped through the air. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and glittering red clips traced down from his scalp to wind behind his ear, catching Dazai's eye as he watched Chuuya turn to Akutagawa to say something.

(Curiously, Dazai watched as Atsushi froze, attention on the instrumentalist as opposed to the neon sign of a man center stage, and felt a small smile creep onto his face. *You're both so transparent*, he thought, amused.)

With a silent count and a breath taken in unison, the music began, and Dazai was once again taken away by the perfect amber tide of syllables as they spilled easily from Chuuya's lips, a soft spiralling solo of the violin underneath him as the silky sound was lifted higher, quiet but still just as enrapturing.

With his eyes closed as he swayed gently to the music, Chuuya sang through the smile perched on his lips as he spoke of absent beauty and loves long lost, and Dazai hummed to himself as he leaned his cheek into his palm, blatantly ignoring the side glance from Yosano. (He just couldn't be bothered tonight.)

Even Akutagawa looked more relaxed than usual, shoulders relaxed but still elegant as he swept through his notes, perfectly placed and sweetly silver in nostalgia to match Chuuya's words. It was a lovely duet, meant to lull the ear to sleep like a memory of a summer dream, and Dazai could feel the atmosphere in the room change as tension seeped out of it like a magic spell.

In short, it was stunning, and there wasn't anyone in the room who didn't notice it. (Dazai could feel an odd snarl of jealousy, foolish and misplaced as he watched people hungrily devour what Chuuya gave to them.)

"Atsushi," Yosano nudged, snapping Dazai as well as Atsushi out of the performance. "Don't you have to get ready soon? Or would you rather keep ogling Akutagawa?"

Atsushi opened his mouth to reply before shutting it, then flushing a solid red and shoving back from the bar, babbling an absent goodbye as he stumbled back down the aisle to disappear through the side stage door. Dazai chuckled to himself as Yosano gave him a look. "Something the matter, dear?" he said innocently. "Am I not allowed to enjoy watching them flounder about?"

She raised her eyebrows. "And here I thought you had your eye on bigger fish, Dazai," she said breezily, and he clicked his tongue.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, eyes lifting back up to the stage as the key shifted into something sharper, Chuuya's melody changing into something more desperate as it swooped into teetering

notes like mountain peaks.

Yosano sighed deeply instead. "I'm not going to get anything out of you today, am I?"

He smiled darkly, not moving his eyes from the stage. "Since when do you get *anything* from me, my dear?" he hummed, and let himself fall away to the sound of music winding behind his eyelids as he slowly let his eyes fall shut.

(Take me away from this miserable place- sing me to sleep.)

After the performance, only the applause finally broke Dazai from his trance, blinking back into the human plane, falling from the fantasy of pure music back into the harsh reality of a stinking club.

Pulling his hand away from his face with a noise of irritation, he scrubbed at the red mark there with a scrunched nose. Yosano snickered at him as he scowled at her, and she pushed a glass of water towards him. "You really do look ten seconds away from sleep," she remarked, and he groaned, laying his head on the table.

"Just let me be sung to death in peace," he complained, and she shook her head with a fond expression.

"Only the best for you, eh?" He didn't move, ignoring her. "Well, you better stay awake for Atsushi and Akutagawa's performance, or they're going to be upset with you; particularly Akutagawa," she added thoughtfully, and he huffed from the table.

"Just let me know when they're up," he mumbled, wrapping his arms around his head and shutting his eyes.

"I've got you, dear," she said, patting his back, and he snorted faintly, burying his face into his arms.

He fell into a faint half-sleep as the stage cleared, snatching a few minutes of rest before Yosano was shaking him.

Lifting his head up, he blinked blearily to see that Akutagawa was on stage once again, but now had a much-less frazzled Atsushi by his side. Both of them stood with a single music stand in front of them, but while Akutagawa was going mechanically over the lines, Atsushi was busy doing last-minute tuning.

(Dazai has never seen the two play a piece together, let alone a duet, and if Atsushi's concerns from earlier were any indication of what was to come, Dazai was nothing but intrigued.)

Both were dressed in evening suits, cropped over high-waisted pants and vests tucked over undershirts and a bow-tie, but they were dressed in perfect inverse; while Atsushi was dressed in traditional black tails and a white vest that set off the color of his hair, Akutagawa wore a creamy white suit and a dark black vest, where the thin chain of a pocket watch could be seen.

Akutagawa's violin hung from his fingers, traditional deep cherry as he tapped his bow against his thigh while keeping Atsushi in the corner of his eye. Letting out a deep breath, Atsushi looked over to Akutagawa, nodding before raising his own instrument, one that was painted white with small doodles decorating the surface done by him and Kyouka, another of *La Chanson's* residents and like a little sister to him.

Both taking a breath, they looked to each other before placing their bows to string and beginning, starting identically in slow, elegant pulls in haunting notes that wavered between low and high.

They played the same sweet melody for a few measures, slow and careful before Atsushi shut his eyes and broke away to play an upper melody that fell atop Akutagawa's notes like the beginning of a spring storm, staccato and short. Then, as Akutagawa slipped into long, languorous and nearly unchanging notes, Atsushi took a breath and shifted the piece into a solo, high and swooping as he shifted and molded it like liquid glass.

It was stunning and from the heart, evident in the lines of his body as it relaxed, and Dazai could see the smile etched into his face as he continued playing, but something that flickered on Akutagawa's face told him that it was somewhat off-script. Dazai was expecting Atsushi to ignore Akutagawa's glare, but not the slow pause as Atsushi opened his eyes and gave his partner a challenging look, deadly and cautious: *Reach my level.*

Akutagawa brushed him off and turned back to the music to pick up at his part, curling and bright like a sleepy Aurora Borealis. Atsushi joined back in, but his eyes flicked over to Akutagawa before incorporating a quiet descant that changed the tempo just enough to keep it from falling flat, but just reinvented enough to make Akutagawa bare his teeth at him. Atsushi smirked before shutting his eyes and finishing out the rest of the line.

Just as they both drew out their lines to a scintillating stop, their harmony crunching and swelling like a storm cloud set to burst, Akutagawa started a new section with sharp notes that burst from beneath his fingers like condensed electricity, focused solely on Atsushi and not looking once at the sheet music. (*Oh? What's this, Akutagawa? Finally found your breaking point?*)

Atsushi's eyes flew open incredulously to gape as Akutagawa effortlessly played from note to note, the new section four times as fast and darker as the storm began to break. *I'll take your challenge,* his eyes said, *so make my time worth it.*

Atsushi grinned as he joined in, playing the lower harmony at the perfect tempo as they raced each other like lightning does thunder, both alive and *burning* as they recomposed around each other impossibly; it was as if the same piece of music had been set alight as the downpour rattled around them.

Yosano turned to give Dazai an opened-mouth smile of incredulity, and Dazai nearly laughed.

The violinists continued playing, their end approaching in a sharpening crescendo as they switched from harmony to melody, each fighting for dominance but still somehow complementing each other perfectly; though they acted irritated, Dazai could see the breathless smiles etched on their faces as they played.

Then, finally, they both finished simultaneously with sharp notes and bows swept from strings, chests heaving in exhaustion and adrenaline as they were bombarded with applause. Yosano wolf-whistled, and even Dazai cheered just once to watch as they stared in shock at the audience before turning to each other. However, after a beat of silence, they both tore away from each other with a

scowl, though both were tellingly red-faced: Akutagawa hid his behind a cough, and Atsushi fiddled nervously with his instrument.

Eventually, they both bowed and cleared the stage, Akutagawa hissing something to Atsushi as they disappeared in the wings, and Dazai leaned forward onto the bar enough to catch Yosano's eye, raising an eyebrow. "Well, that was certainly a benchmark performance if I've ever seen one," he said, and Yosano laughed brightly.

"It was incredible is what it was," she agreed, "and I'm thinking that, well, let's just say I have a certain bet running for those two." She smirked at him, and he dropped his jaw in mock surprise.

"You, a *bet*? Now, that's just positively *unheard of*," he said saccharinely, and she smiled into the lip of her glass. "And just what was this bet for, pray tell?"

She spread her arms to gesture to the bar. "An entire round of free drinks is waiting for me, and rather soon, I do believe," she announced, and Dazai snorted.

"You do have an absurd tendency for picking out romance," he said blithely, before pausing, tapping his lip in consideration. "That, as well pathetic-hearted men," he added, and she raised her glass.

"Both talents I quite covet, thank you," she toasted, and he sarcastically raised his own glass of water to tap it against her own.

"You're certainly a specimen, Yosano Akiko," Dazai said rhetorically as he set his glass down to drum his fingers against the wood.

She hummed, an amused sound like the curl of an instrument in her chest. "Perhaps," she said, mimicking his succinct response from earlier, earning a dry click of the tongue that made her chuckle. "Think you could stay tonight? I'm sure both of the boys would love to talk with you," she suggested.

Dazai caught his lips between his teeth, dragging the skin between the points before replying as he thought back to work he would need to do and the sleep he should catch up on. However, staying meant a possibly to see Chuuya off stage, and from the patient look on Yosano's face, it seemed she knew exactly what he was considering. He sighed. "You refer to them as if they're children, my dear," he chided instead, "but you forget that we're only a few years older than they are."

She pursed her lips at him before pressing a hand against her face, tired. "Well, they certainly *act* as such," she replied, not bothering to reply to Dazai's evasiveness.

Dazai only stared into the bottom of his glass with a smile like a flickering flame. "They should it enjoy while they can," he muttered, more a prayer to himself and the grain of the wood than words meant to heard by anyone else.

(War has a way of stripping the breath and life from even the hardiest of lungs, crushing innocence and childhood beneath its heavy foot, and Dazai knew all too well what kind of scars it left in its wake.)

After the bar finally emptied out for the night sometime after 2 am, Dazai was left with the quiet conversation of people he knew surrounding him, with Ranpo and Kunikida joining him and Yosano to talk.

While Kunikida sat to Dazai's left, Ranpo was sitting on *top* of the bar with his legs crossed under him, rocking back and forth as he chattered absently to Yosano about something Dazai couldn't focus on. Kunikida has tried scolding him, but Ranpo had only ignored him and continued talking about some drunk woman who'd crashed into his booth thinking it was the restroom.

"I mean seriously, she was about two shots of booze too many and she kept insisting that I was a lecher because it was *obviously* the women's water closet, but despite my gesturing to the microphone and my *desk* space as opposed to toilets, I *still* earned a slap for my innocence," he ranted, leaning back to uncross his legs and kick them against the bar paneling.

Yosano laughed as Kunikida scowled sternly at him. "Ranpo, if you scuff the bar you *will* be paying for it," he grouched.

Ranpo dropped his head back with a sound of disgruntlement. "Not your bar, so your threat holds no water," he singsonged lazily, and Kunikida shot him a glare. Dazai snorted into the rim of his glass, earning a smack to the back of the head from the bartender.

"Owww, *Kunikida!*" Dazai whined, rubbing his head petulantly as the others guffawed. "Such a brute!"

Kunikida gave him a deadpan glare. "You're an adult man- act like one," he said levelly. Dazai pouted at him.

Yosano, still laughing, slung an arm over his shoulders and pulled him toward her. "You pissed off Kuniki *dad*," she teased, and Dazai snorted at the odd vernacular while Kunikida huffed at her profanity.

Dazai began to jokingly weep into her shoulder about how cruel Kunikida was, enjoying Kunikida's irritation as the rest of the party laughed. However, he paused and peeked curiously over Yosano's arm when he heard one of the stage doors opening, heart hitching when he found the source of the disturbance.

With an ink-black coat pooling from his shoulders and his hat pulled low over his face, Nakahara Chuuya himself strolled into the room with an amused smile on his face as he strode up the incline. Dazai's eyes widened as he took in the sight, and lifted his head surreptitiously.

Yosano gave him an odd look before turning his head toward his line of sight, face lighting up as she raised a hand. "Hey, Chuuya! You're never out this early!" she called cheerily as he approached, wearing a smile meant for Dazai that said *'Here's your chance, sweetheart.'*

Dazai smirked as Chuuya reached them, sighing deeply as he plopped down beside Yosano. "Figured I should head out early before it got more uncomfortable," he said evenly, a thin smile on his lips holding amusement behind his dry words.

"You, *Monsieur* Brick Wall? What could possibly make *you* uncomfortable enough to come and

socialize?” Yosano asked as Chuuya rolled his eyes.

“I second the lady’s question,” Ranpo called, and Chuuya tossed him a weak glare.

“How about two horny violinists in a closet?” he muttered, but it was clear he was trying not to laugh in addition to his irritation.

Kunikida shot him an incredulous look as Ranpo hooted, and Yosano’s jaw dropped. “Well, *what* did I say?” she said, elbowing Dazai in the side, making him wince through a laugh. Chuuya’s eyes slid over to him, finally registering the unfamiliar person there, and Dazai felt a faint flicker of pride as Chuuya’s eyes widened. “Well, Chuuya dear, I think you know what that means,” Yosano continued, pulling Chuuya’s attention away from Dazai.

Chuuya paused before groaning, leaning his head back in realization. “Son of a bitch,” he swore, tugging his hat from his head to drop it onto the bar and dragging his blood-red hands through his hair.

Yosano laughed loudly and clapped a hand to his shoulder as he groaned. “Thanks for the drinks, love,” she teased, before shooting a questioning look to Kunikida, who sighed and stood to slip behind the bar.

“Thank that supply closet,” Chuuya said bitterly, his acerbic tone making Dazai choke out a surprised laugh. Chuuya turned toward him then, cocking an eyebrow. “Okay, who are you?” he asked, scrutinizing Dazai. “Don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

I’ve been at this bar far longer than you have, Dazai mused stubbornly, but instead chose to give him the widest grin he could possibly give, mirroring the one he gave him long ago when he’d caught his eye from the back of the room. “I’m the best person you’re ever gonna meet,” he said, words bordering between introductory and flirty, and he enjoyed the look of surprise on Chuuya’s face before it melted into irritation *far* too much.

Yosano sighed at Dazai before placing a hand on his arm. “Chuuya, this is Dazai Osamu, a friend of mine from the war,” she introduced, and Dazai clicked his tongue.

“Yosano, how *dare* you sell our love so *short*?” he lamented dramatically, laying his head back on her shoulder as he carefully watched Chuuya’s expression shift.

“Wait, don’t tell me you two...?” he started, pointing between them incredulously, fixing Dazai with a faint look of *‘Seriously? This one?’*

She shoved Dazai’s head off of her with a smile, laughing when Dazai whined at her. “No, absolutely not,” she said brightly, and Dazai gave her an insulted look. “He’s too much of an ass for that.”

“Language,” Kunikida called as he started to slide a drink toward her, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

“Number one: no, and number two: I need drinks for all them as well,” she said, waving a hand at the whole party, earning a cheer from both Ranpo and Dazai as Chuuya gaped at her.

“What-? Akiko, *no*, that’s not what I-“ he started, but Yosano leaned forward to shush him with her

finger. (Dazai filed away the fact that he was easily flustered, and adorable at that.)

“The bet was for a round of drinks to be bought by the loser, but I never specified for how many,” she reiterated. Chuuya swatted her hand away with a scowl, before sighing and digging for his wallet.

“*Fine*,” he conceded, tossing a few bills onto the counter. Kunikida gave him a dubious look, but Chuuya just waved a hand toward him, and Kunikida cautiously took the money. “Before any of you ask, I’m never doing this again,” he warned, but there was no venom in his words.

Resounding gratitude echoed through the empty room as Kunikida prepared drinks, and Dazai toasted to Chuuya with a shit-eating grin on his face as he downed the bitter liquid. Chuuya only scowled at him, mouthing a half-whispered ‘*I don’t even know you*’ that made Dazai’s grin widen.

Mixed among the absent chatter, Dazai watched Chuuya, watched how he fidgeted with the edges of his gloves or wound his fingers into strands of hair, listened to how his accent shifted and slipped around the edges of his Japanese as exhaustion and alcohol started to wear away the precision of it, and just sat silently to observe how he moved up close, how he functioned off stage when eyes weren’t on him- he was more intrigued than he cared to admit.

However, he must have felt at least *one* set of eyes, as he turned to Dazai with a gruff huff. “What?” he barked, face going flat and defensive. “Is there something on my face?”

Dazai started, internally flinching, but he only smiled and leaned onto the bar, looking around Yosano. “I was just thinking that you look smaller in person than you do on stage,” he said, testing his provocation, his reaction-

And watched as Chuuya’s face went red in anger, eyes narrowing at him as his entire body went ramrod straight like a wolf with its hackles raised. Dazai smirked, small and dangerous, and he ignored the warning look Yosano was giving him.

“What did you say?” Chuuya said lowly, fingers going still.

Dazai hummed and toyed with his glass, watching the ice shift and clink. “Merely an observation, *petit chou*,” he replied, reveling in how dark Chuuya’s face got as his fingers started to twitch. *Easily riled up then, hm?*

Chuuya shifted ever so slightly, mouth opening to fire back a retort before Yosano placed a hand over each one of theirs, giving them both a thin smile of ‘*don’t you fucking dare.*’ Chuuya pressed his lips together and shot a sharp glare at Dazai, who only wiggled his fingers at him in a wave.

Thankfully for Chuuya, who was turning steadily redder at the second, the sound of a door slamming shut interrupted them, and Dazai looked up to see a startled Atsushi, who’d frozen the instant the door shrieked.

Despite being down by the pit, the wide-eyed expression of fear on his face was all too clear, and Atsushi knew it as Yosano raised her drink. “Oi, Atsushi! Thanks for the free drinks!” she yelled down to him, and he squinted at her in hesitant confusion as his fingers tightened around the strap attached to the violin case on his back. “Couldn’t of gotten ‘em without that *libido* of yours!”

“Be gentle,” Kunikida warned them all wearily, but the notion went unheeded. (Particularly by

Ranpo, who'd curled up on his side and fallen asleep already.)

Atsushi squeaked in embarrassment before shooting a helpless look to Chuuya, who only shrugged. Eyes flicking back up to the rest of them, he started to edge toward the staircase on the other side of the room, babbling the whole way. "I didn't- we weren't- it's not what you think, I swear-"

"I forgot to mention it before, but fantastic performance tonight, Atsushi!" Chuuya called, only flustering the poor boy more as he tried to hurry faster across the room.

"And I *don't* think he means the one in the closet," Dazai added mirthfully, earning a surprised and equally amused expression from Chuuya as well as Atsushi tripping over his own feet as he broke into a run, reaching the door and fussing with the handle.

"If you two didn't clean up your mess I'm going to kick your asses," Chuuya tacked on, and Atsushi's scarlet face clashed with his hair as he yanked the door open and fell through the opening, slamming it shut just as Yosano yelled a final "*Say hi to Kyouka for me!*" behind him.

Kunikida, with hands propped on his hips and a disapproving look on his face, sighed deeply as he shook his head. Dazai gave him a cheeky grin and a wave, which only got a scowl in return.

(He didn't notice Chuuya watching him curiously in return, unconsciously intrigued as he was initially pissed off, uncertain of what it was about this odd man and his barbed tongue that pulled so strangely at his heart.)

Ranpo was positively miffed when he awoke to discover that he'd missed out on teasing Atsushi, and complained to Yosano that he wasn't able to observe the rest of Dazai and Chuuya's interaction due to his exhaustion.

Yosano only patted him gently on the shoulder, insisting that all would be fine.

Shutting the door to his small apartment and leaning against it with a sigh, Chuuya took a deep breath and shut his eyes to focus on the silence of the room. He let the breath out and pushed back from the door, feeling the paper tucked in his inner pocket pulse and pound like a crooked heartbeat.

The letter had been passed between him and Yosano like contraband, him plucking it from between her fingers to shove it out of sight as Dazai- that pain-in-the-ass friend of hers- watched the exchange curiously; Chuuya had only refused to look at him as his face burned, and he bid her a quick goodbye before rushing out into the night.

Gnawing on his lip, he shook his coat from his shoulders and unbuttoned his vest as he sat down at his table, stripping off his gloves to reveal the ugly scars he kept hidden from the prying eyes of the day's light. Scowling at his hands, he distracted himself by prying the envelope from his pocket and popping the seal, this time smelling the sweet scent of the petals he saw pressed into the

back of the note.

“Ah, a reply, and seemingly from a poet of all things! Well, I'm flattered, sincerely, that you decided to test the waters. I'll have you know that your absence this past weekend was sorely felt, though I must comment that your friend- one Yosano Akiko, as I'm told you know well- was ceaseless in her tormenting.

On another note.... A ghost, you've so named me? Well, I must say, you are so much more than I, for you are a phoenix, a will-o'-the-wisp, a burning flame, and to say it doesn't pull at these heartstrings of mine would be short of a lie as you spin siren songs with your words. (It's funny how anonymity creates such an ease of which to speak, no?)

So... will you teach this poor ghost how to move on?

- *Hippeastrum reginae*

He swiped a thumb over the signature, once again dizzy as he read those compliments and pretty words so easily written without a drop of hesitation, and he let himself smile dumbly as he read the message over and over again.

This time, he knew the meaning of flower gifted along with the note, and traced at the elegant petals as they swept out in curving lines, wishing he could hold the life blossom within his palm and feel it hum like a loving heart-

The amaryllis, meant to celebrate splendorous beauty and pride, red as blood and the color of the giddy emotion Chuuya could feel painting the inside of his ribcage.

(He could feel that instinctual fear rear its ugly head again, shrieking against his racing pulse in the voice of his mother that he was a mistake, a sin, that his heart was sing and wrong, but then he thought to himself *'how can something so natural an innocent and **right** be wrong?'*

The voice quieted for if but a moment.)

Here, in the safety of his home and away from prying eyes, Chuuya let himself fold the letter to his chest with a smile, and for once his turbulent life, let himself hope as simply and as purely as a child on a star.

(Faintly, oh so faintly, his mind flickered back to dark hair and a smile like the edge of knife, infuriating but intriguing, but it faded before he had a chance to chase just what it meant.)

(*“Cher Fantôme- “*

*“i assure you, dear ghost
that i am by no means a prize:
not to be won
not to be sought
not to be coveted
in all truth, i'd call you mad for your sugar-sweet compliments
and tell you you must be blind*

but there's something about you that tells me your mind will not be changed so easily-

but something also tells me that there's a treasure within you as well.

-bien à vous, N.C.)

The two of them became an interesting dynamic; Yosano had been right, for Dazai was able to get on every one of Chuuya's nerves, constantly irritating him and riling him up indeed just like a match struck, but Chuuya only fired back in spades, desperate to quell the itch that Dazai sent under his skin the second he opened his mouth.

It started as a game, a way to pass the time as insults and swears (and the occasional punch) were thrown, but anyone could see the strange symbiotic energy that hummed with every razor-blade word bitten between teeth, a satisfied gleam in their eyes as vicious victory twisted their lips.

They were dangerous, bloodthirsty, hungry for the buzz that danced in their veins as they battled each other, a menace to the peace in the room whenever they were near each other.

But- eventually, mysteriously, the violence and physical altercations (Dazai had ended up earning a split lip at one point, fully enjoying the wide-eyed expression on Chuuya's face as he slowly licked the blood from his lips, pulse pounding in rivalry-tainted attraction) ebbed into barely-venomous barbs and faintly-insulting nicknames, punches turning into jabs and pure hatred shifting into something... odd.

Chuuya, open as a book and flamboyant in the way that fire burned and destroyed like the wrath of a hurricane, loud of voice and of mind as he yelled and fought, yet guarded and hesitant with emotions; Dazai, mysterious and unknown even to himself, dangerous like an impending storm or the second before an avalanche, seemingly blunt in his opinion but cautious with his true heart-

Somehow, they fit like perfect jigsaw pieces, complementary, latching within each other like a gasp of air that screamed *'Where have you been my whole life?'*, for anyone who saw them act would guess that they'd been friends since childhood. Their relationship was seemingly effortless, predestined, obvious as they fell in each other's gravity, yet they'd only first met barely months ago.

(Yosano, that she-devil, had guessed it right all along, and Dazai was forever flummoxed.)

Dazai now knew two sides of Chuuya- the friend and the poet, the rival and the object of his affection, the equal opposite and the eloquent, and he knew that he was in too far over his head, for as they became inseparable in person, he could feel the undeniable pull Chuuya was realizing within their letters.

Dazai was in love whether he wanted to be or not, beyond the first passing infatuation or sharp curiosity, and it was painting his heart in shades of colors he didn't even know existed.

He'd listened to Chuuya ramble on and on about how he hated the color green because it clashed

with his hair, lounging in his changing room as he heard Chuuya bellow down the hall (affectionately, of course) for Akutagawa and Atsushi to *'be a little quieter,'* snickering when he heard mortified shrieks and calls of *'it's not what you think!'*, had seen him passed out drunk with makeup and clothes a mess and snoring (as well as drooling, but Chuuya refused to admit it) soundly face-first on the bar- all menial and human and dumbly wonderful.

Dazai knew how much Chuuya hated how easily he blushed, how he hated the taste of brandy, always knew when Chuuya was stressed because of the curling scent of tobacco clouding around him that coated Dazai's tongue on those days, knew he acted like an older brother to the rest of the *La Chanson* crew, knew why he wore so many layers (he hated how frail he looked), knew that short jokes made him angry the quickest, and knew that Chuuya loved, loved, *loved* music with his entire heart-

On the other hand, however, he'd also seen the darker sides of Chuuya encased in shaking handwriting and sudden fear if the letters they shared were truly the right thing to do, had seen the wonders he'd weaved in a few lines of poetry, a lovely mix of perfect Japanese and French, and had read his desperation to understand what he was feeling, and Dazai fiercely wished that he could say the truths he spoke as a ghost directly to the person who'd solidly enraptured his heart.

(He didn't know what had cut Chuuya so deeply to be so *scared* of himself, why he shunned himself, caged himself, didn't know why he flinched at the sound of a woman's call, didn't know why he tried so hard to distance himself from true connection, and Dazai wanted nothing more than to learn it all, to make the hurt *stop*.)

Dazai was at an impasse, for he knew how terrified Chuuya was of himself and his own heart, yet in turn he also knew how selfish he himself was.

(*'How do we move forward?'* he'd written, over and over and over, but he always scratched it out, drowning his frustration in ink.)

He was in love with Chuuya, that much he knew.

But.

Chuuya was scared to love the nameless ghost, and certainly never looked at Dazai with the same intrigue that Dazai did Chuuya.

Dazai painted himself into a corner, and he didn't know how to get out-

His own heart was trying to shred him.

(He never guessed it would have gone this far.)

Pacing through his dressing room, Chuuya babbled angrily to Yosano as he tried to talk through his frustration, hands- today deep-blue velvet- tearing through his hair as his lips moved incessantly.

"I just don't understand how you can *stand* him, Akiko!" he hissed. "He's just so- so-"

"So?" Yosano chimed in sarcastically, but Chuuya was so beside himself he didn't hear it.

“*God*, he’s so damn infuriating, always making *comments* and just being irritating enough to make me want to punch his damn face in!” he forced out, stopping in the center of the room to drag his hands down his face with a groan.

Yosano sighed. “What did Dazai do this time, dear? I thought you two were on much better terms,” she asked, crossing her arms to peer at him in concern- but there was a touch of humor in her features that made him wary.

He huffed, propping his hands on his hips and drumming his fingers against them. “He just got tipsy and flirted with every woman around him claiming he was the best gift they could ever receive, while also just slinging insult after insult at me because he could.” He bit the words out, thin and dry.

Yosano quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve been friends with him for... how long?” she asked rhetorically. “Shouldn’t you be used to this already?”

He scoffed. “I’d use the word ‘friend’ lightly,” he answered flatly. “God, I *hate* him; he’s so forward and blunt, annoying, *weird*, all bound in those stupid, grungy-ass bandages-” he vaguely mocked wrapping something around his arms before continuing- “and he just seems to press *every damn button* I have like it’s a *game* and it *pisses me off*, and he’s so, just so, so-”

“Hot?” Yosano filled in helpfully, cutting off his rant as he froze, eyes wide before his face flushed solid red.

“You- no no no,” he tried, taking a defensive stance that was lost with in his flustered expression.

“Sweetheart, I have eyes,” she said slowly, “and that man, while certainly not my taste, is attractive, and *you’ve* obviously noticed as well.”

He gaped at her, mouth opening and closing like a fish before he scowled at her. “Don’t be stupid,” he admonished, but it was more a warning flare to *stay away* than a strike meant to cut to the core.

Yosano clicked her tongue. “Stop deluding yourself, Chuuya; you *don’t* hate him, and you’ve obviously got a crush on him that *you* just don’t know how to deal with- or *him*, rather.”

Chuuya stopped, blinking, before stepping back toward the wall and sliding down it with a groan,

pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I don’t know,” he grumbled, his mind screaming, his *heart* screaming; of course he’d noticed it, the elegant lines of his fingers either running around the rim of a glass or steepled under his chin, the coffee-dark hair that he kept out of the confines of typical gel, falling into even darker eyes that looked *into* Chuuya, darker than the bottom of a black hole and just as emptily-starving, how his voice was like music carved from the deepest of ocean-bound agate as it swooped and fell intoxicatingly- yes, he *noticed*, and he hated every moment his heart edged closer that dangerous cliff-side he never once tried to touch after that Icarus-fall all of those years again.

I can’t let myself, I can’t, is what he wanted to say.

“I am a twenty-two-year-old-man; I don’t have a *crush*,” is what he said instead, petulant and grouching.

“You really do, honey, and if you don’t believe me, look me in the eye and tell me your heart doesn’t flutter just a bit whenever you see him, no matter what emotion you decide to label it as,” she said, levelling him with a plain look. “It’s undeniable, and obvious at that.”

Chuuya made a sharp noise in his throat. “We fight with every breath we have every minute of the day,” he tried to argue, but even he knew it was a weak attempt.

“Only because there’s some unconscious part of you that *enjoys* that connection,” she countered, before holding up a hand to cut off his next protest. “In addition, you two also talk for hours and hours about nothing, and it’s like the rest of the world just doesn’t exist for either of you in that moment.”

His breath froze in his lungs as he parsed the words, gripped by a dark fear that shook him like a silent earthquake. *No, no, no-*

“Lest you forget that I’ve also known him for a long time, and I can tell you that you intrigue him at the least; he doesn’t bother with people he doesn’t care for, and yet who is the one he goes out of his way to see?” she continued, but something in her reply made his heart stop cold-

“Simply put, you intrigue me-” Those words from the first letter he received-

“But I care not to define for you the depth.”

It’s just a coincidence.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chuuya said, the words more meant for his heartbeat as it beat crookedly. “He’s obviously only interested in *women*, anyway-” he saw Yosano freeze with a laugh caught in her breath for a second, but she swallowed it down just as quickly- “and besides, I still have my gho- *secret admirer* to worry about,” he finished, voice going nearly silent as he spoke, eyes going wide at how it had gone from “a ghost” to “*my ghost*”. He saw Yosano give him a knowing expression, and felt like he was constantly at the edge of the tide just as it flowed out of his reach, always missing something seemingly obvious.

He paused then, throat catching on a memory that made his face burn in embarrassment. “Son of a bitch, even *he* knows about the letters,” he said, pressing a hand into the side of his face in an effort to hide in acute mortification.

Yosano paused, watching him curiously. “What do you mean?”

Chuuya shut his eyes with a groan. “Before he left, he handed me this-” he reached into his jacket to pull out a brand new letter, not opening his eyes- “and told me that someone wanted him to deliver this to me.” He withered then, thinking back to Dazai’s odd expression- *he was making fun of me, he had to be*- and winced, wanting to scrub himself away. “God *dammit*.”

Yosano tilted her head, the pin in her hair catching in the light. “He delivered the letter to you?” she asked carefully. “Did you ask where he got it from?”

Chuuya sighed and dropped his hand, fixing her with a look. “I wasn’t going to give him any more fuel he could use to tease me, so I just snatched it and left,” he answered.

Yosano nodded, humming, a strange expression on her face that he couldn’t quite translate, but didn’t bother to. “Interesting,” she said quietly, just barely above her breath, and he squinted.

“What?”

She paused and looked back up at him, folding her hands and giving him a bright smile. “Nothing, nothing,” she said dismissively, and he didn’t buy it. “But from what it sounds like, I take it things are going well with that pen pal of yours?”

He debated responding but humoured her anyway, telling her about the strange, whimsical mind of the letters he received and the flowers whose meaning he crafted with ink and paper effortlessly.

As he spoke, he realized two devastating things-

One: he was dangerously close to *something* with his ghost, something that hummed in a darkened place of his heart he never wanted to touch or explore, too scarred (too scared) to ever open the barbed-wire locks he'd put around it-

Two: Yosano was right; there was something irritably magnetic about Dazai, his beauty like a deadly edge of a knife that Chuuya wanted to bare his wrists to, his *neck* to, but was terrified of what *Dazai* would say when he saw that the blood that spilled from Chuuya's skin wasn't *human*, long corrupted by the ugly words of someone he once held dear.

Shit, he thought eloquently, *I think I'm falling in love*.

(But which one? his heart sang, which one do you want?)

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.)

"Dazai, you *idiot*, how pretentious can you be, waltzing up to deliver your *own damn letter* to him? It's supposed to be anonymous for a *reason*."

"Relax, Yosano dear, he's too dense to have realized anyway."

"You're damn lucky he is, or he'd be coming after you right now, and *not* in the sexy way."

(Dazai sighed.) "You didn't see his *face*, Yosano; for a split second, I could *see* how excited he was, but then his face just fell completely like he was terrified of something, like he was punishing himself."

"I can't help you with that, dear, he's pretty lock-and-key like I told you."

"I know, I know, it's just...."

“What?”

“Nothing.”

(She huffed.) “You two, I swear; you’re going to give me gray hair early because of your inability to communicate.”

“In my opinion, you’d look absolutely *lovely* with silver hair.”

“You do realize your flattery isn’t going to get you anywhere, yes?”

“Mm, can’t say I didn’t try my best.”

“If that was your best, you’ve gotta work a *lot* harder in order to get it through to that dense man you’re so stupidly infatuated with.”

“Hm, perhaps I will. We’ll see.”

(Yosano snorted, rolling her eyes as she downed the rest of her drink, watching the faint but undeniably soft expression on Dazai’s face.

Idiots, the both of them.)

The letters didn’t stop, pitching and rolling and falling into each other in crashing waves of an ink-storm as both drowned in each other, days blending into months dated in perfectly penned numbers-

“I think I see just what you are-

A soul of a Phoenix, glorious and burning and bright on the outside but to yourself, to your mind's eye and the eyes in the mirror, you see yourself as charred and burnt, blackened and used-

Don't think for a second that is true.

In fact, I think even entertaining the thought is rather absurd.

To be blunt, you're beautiful-

And I mean all of the dark corners in addition to the ones in the light.

-Rhododendron"

(Many meanings befell the blossom that came with this letter, but with one bloom being dark red and the other near magenta, the azalea spoke of dual meanings: a question, a reaching hand of fragile, developing love, and a gentle command of well-being- 'take care of yourself'.)

Replies spilled between them like a jar of shattered sky, Dazai the diamond-speckled mystery of twilight and Chuuya the burning wings of the soaring sunset-

"Mon Cher Fantôme"-

My dear ghost-

"stubborn you are indeed, oh ghost

But if i am the phoenix flame you insistently refer to as

then what are you?

i know not of your face

your voice

for i only know your words

and a bit of your heart,

i'd like to think

*but if you could see what truly lies within this heart of mine
i'm afraid you may just be disgusted.*

-bien à vous, N.C."

Until they blended into each other irrevocably-

"You can't scare me away so easily, my dear, for I believe if you were to unravel me, my strands of false, menial humanity, you may just find dust in your touch's wake.

Don't sell yourself so short.

-Iris sibirica"

(A flower of thin and elegant petals and yellow patches like spilled ink in its center, the iris was a rich blue message of hope, faith, and the breath of royalty.)

*"i find your request impossible-
call it selfish
self-deprecating
but pride is on the line
and i'm afraid i don't have much of it left to spare.*

-le tiens, N.C."-

(Yours, N.C.)

And they both knew a line somewhere had been crossed, dangerous and hidden beneath pretty words whose meanings were anchor-deep in an ocean so forgotten and unexplored-

“Afraid of your own heart-

I can see your apprehension in the stress lines of your ink.

I don't mean to frighten you, make you hide or run away, and it makes me sick to know that I have caused such a reaction when I had no such intent.

Sincerely, I'm sorry-

Sing me a Requiem, a song of rest, of death, O Siren, O Muse, and consider it my penance, but perhaps... just perhaps I can teach you how to love.

-Hyacinthus orientalis”

(Small flowers of purple-blue, these blossoms sang of deep regret like the blood of Hyakinthos' blood spilt.)

“i'm a shattered sun that does not spin

and you a burning constellation

show me the way to fly

show me the way to burn

show me the way to feel

without it feeling wrong

enseigne-moi l'impossible

enseigne-moi l'impossible

enseigne-moi l'impossible

show me to the light

-le tiens, N.C.”

But neither of them wanted to stop in the slightest.

The walls all came crashing down, however; a tiny pinprick made the whole dam burst in a tide that nearly swallowed Chuuya whole-

But Dazai was able to catch him by the tips of his fingers, only barely able to hold on.

“I’m going to punch you if you don’t let me get ready, Dazai,” Chuuya grouched, scowling at the man in question currently straddling one of Chuuya’s free chairs and examining his nails.

Dazai hummed and looked up at him, an innocent look spreading over his face. “What, are you saying you’re tired of my lovely presence?” he asked, resting his chin on his hand to peer up at Chuuya with the best doe eyes he could muster, fully enjoying the irritated expression on his face.

He was half-dressed, only in a bright-blue undershirt untucked from his pants, sleeves pushed up his arms with gray gloved-hands propped on his hip. His eyebrow disappeared into his untamed mess of curls as he stared Dazai down; internally, Dazai made the note that he *far* preferred this undone version of Chuuya as opposed to the made up one he was used to.

“Yes, I am,” Chuuya answered dryly, and Dazai gasped, clutching his chest dramatically.

“How could you be so *cold, mon petit chou?*” he lamented, and felt a smug smile creep onto his face as Chuuya pinked at the nickname.

“Just- *get out*,” he spit, reaching behind him and chucking his vest- which had been folded nicely on the vanity, missing Dazai by a mile as he ducked away with a bright laugh. “You piece of-”

“Ah ah ah, watch that mouth of yours,” he scolded, and he watched Chuuya’s eye twitch.

“*Connard*,” he muttered, and Dazai tsked.

“What did I just say?” he chastised, and Chuuya flattened his lips into a thin line.

Dazai held up his hands in surrender before Chuuya could say anything, knowing ‘*asshole*’ was the softest of insults that would come out of his mouth if he continued. “I’m going, I’m going,” he ceded, standing up from his seat, and Chuuya blew out a deep breath. “*Bonne chance*, darling!” he called as backtracked through the door, hearing a muffled swear as he shut the door behind him. “And don’t forget your hat!”

Snickering to himself, he turned to see Atsushi paused in the hallway, raising an eyebrow at him before shaking his head, disappearing into room of the lounge room before Dazai could comment.

Now perched back at his usual spot beside Yosano, absently listening as she and Kunikida talked, eyes focused on the odd woman seated by herself at one of corner tables; she was older, dressed plainly in black, but she still held the air of grace, her pale hair pulled into a severe bun absent of any adornments. Her fingers drummed lightly on the table, and Dazai could only catch a faint glimpse of her measured expression from where it was turned away into the shadow.

In short, she stuck out in the atmosphere of *La Chanson*, and Dazai was intrigued to say the least.

His attention was drawn away from her as scattered applause broke his focus, and he looked up to see the three performers- both of the Akutagawas as well as Atsushi- finishing their piece, looking relieved and relaxed as they stretched and shifted about. (He didn’t miss the small look Atsushi shot Akutagawa, nor the tiny blip of a smile that he earned in return.) Smiling at the audience, they shifted their seats and stands until they were set far upstage away from the audience, leaving a space for someone else to fill in front of the microphone.

That person was Chuuya, as he stepped out of the wings, elegance in every step as he walked toward the center, raising a hand in greeting. Now fully dressed, he wore a dark gray suit with the edge of that blue undershirt peeking out from his vest, his gloves a few shades lighter than the rest of the outfit. He still wore his black hat, but as he settled in front of the mic with a deep breath, he pulled the hat from his head and dropped it beside him, running his hands through his hair that- as Dazai realized with a short hitch of breath- he’d left undone and ungelled, no pins nor clips, wild and loose just the way that Dazai liked it.

Taking another breath, he leaned the mic toward him to speak, the amplification of it making his voice hiss and hum through static. “*Good evening, ladies and gentleman,*” he started, voice falling over the room like a gentle rain. “*It’s a pleasure to perform for you all once again, but tonight is a rather special night, as it commemorates the sixth month of my employment here at **La Chanson du Noir**.*” Scattered cheers (including a loud whoop from Yosano) and applause filled the room, drawing a surprised smile to his face before he continued. “*I’d like to thank those who’ve supported me as well as to you all who listen to me night to night, and-*” he paused for a second, biting his lip before laughing wryly- “*to the little ghost that’s been haunting me, this song’s a tribute to you, and a thank you in turn.*” (Yosano shot Dazai a knowing look, and he only smirked at her.)

With that, he stepped back just a centimeter and took in a deep breath, shutting his eyes for a second before nodding to the musicians behind him- now joined by a trumpet- to begin, and started the swinging beat of a familiar song that Dazai knew, surprising him. *Édith Piaf?* he thought to himself as he watched Chuuya sway to the intro, foot tapping to the beat of trumpet. *Not only a woman, but a soprano at that? Interesting.*

Then, the music swelled and faded for beginning of the first verse, and Chuuya opened his eyes and sang.

“Non, rien de rien,

Non, je ne regrette rien.”

(No, nothing at all,

No, I regret nothing.)

Pitched only slightly lower, the words and the showy vowels and the curled ‘r’s fit perfectly on his tongue, chasing the long notes the stretch of a wave to crash back down into the syllables rolled under his tongue as he continued, the momentum of the music building and rising behind him as he continued the verse.

“Ni le bien qu’on m’a fait,

Ni le mal-”

(Not the good things that they did to me,

Nor the bad-)

He shifted then as he braced his breath, only to surge into an impossibly and *perfectly* belted high note as he finished the line, earning surprise cheers as he held the note, one arm rising to follow the sound as he was swept away.

“Tout ça m'est bien égal!”

(May as well be the same to me!)

He continued to the next verse in the same breath, repeating the same lines and their melodies, but the mood shifted as he switched to the last part of the verse as it rose up to catch him again:

“C'est payé, balayé, oublié-”

(It's bought and paid for, wiped away, forgotten-)

He reached the same crest as before, but this time slowed down and swept through the notes, easy and decided.

Je me fous du passé!”

(I don't give a damn about the past!)

As the music lifted, he took a breath and settled into a gentler melody, the strings gently plucking a light tune that swung and danced liked the curled pages of an old photograph dusted in nostalgia as Chuuya continued to verse, both hands coming back down to hold the microphone stand.

“Avec mes souvenirs

J'ai allumé le feu

Mes chagrins, mes plaisirs-

Je n'ai plus besoin d'eux;”

(With my memories

I've lit up the fire

Of my troubles, my pleasures-

I don't need them anymore;)

The verse continued, slower and sweeter and sweeter, and Dazai hadn't even realized he'd begun to match his breaths to the beats of the music.

“Balayées les amours

Et tous leurs trémolos,

Balayés pour toujours-”

(Wiped away the romances

And all their instabilities,

Swept away for eternity-)

The line wound further down and down with the time, slowing to a stop as Chuuya dipped down into the final low note of the line that hummed in Dazai's chest.

“Je repars à zéro.”

(I restart at zero.)

Then, the music picked back up, echoing the same melody as before, the strings pulling effortless twining lines through the brass of the trumpet. As Chuuya repeated the first verse with newfound determination, Dazai watched the little ticks, how Chuuya's hands fluttered in time to the words and shaped them from the air, constantly in motion as he breathed through the line and carried a sound that was so much bigger than he appeared with an incredible range to match.

Easily- though much more than usual- he'd enraptured the entirety of the room like he'd cast a spell, singing the lyrics as though they were borne of his own heart, begging the audience to focus on him and him alone-

But there was one person who watched him differently, one with a dark aura that repelled the intoxicating charm of the music as if it melted from her touch: the woman in the corner, whose face was lost in shadow.

Dazai didn't have time to dissect her as Chuuya reached the final verse, the music spiralling around him as his determination turned to fire, sincere and certain-

“Non, rien de rien,

Non, je ne regrette rien...”

(No, nothing at all,

No, I regret nothing....)

The lyrics shifted, and as the music swelled and broke, the wave froze, letting him bring the final words home as one hand pressed to his heart and the other held out to the audience, holding the note impossibly long and strong as the music concluded victoriously behind him.

“Car ma vie, car mes joies-

Aujourd'hui, ça commence avec toi!”

(Because my life, because my joys-

Today, I begin with you!)

By the time the lyrics registered to Dazai, the audience was already in an uproar and Chuuya dropped his arms, breathless and smiling from ear to ear as he looked out into the sea of people, flipping back to look at the musicians giving him equally breathless expressions, burnt gold and ivory in the light of the spotlights as he *glowed*.

(It took a minute for Dazai to remember how to breathe again.)

Eventually, the spell of the performance broke and Dazai was dropped back into reality, a small smile perched on his lips that barely hinted at the tumultuous feeling cresting behind his breastbone, numbing and swaying and deliciously dangerous as it dipped in time to a heartbeat that wasn't his (every breath, every word, every gesture-).

However, as the musicians cleared off the stage, Yosano chattering excitedly in his ear with words he wasn't hearing, his eyes were focused on the lady hidden in the shadows who seemed unaffected by the music or the feeling in the room, a shell of icy impassiveness surrounding her that glared like a neon sign. There was something off about her, but Dazai wanted to brush it aside; after all, it wasn't an odd occurrence for particularly undesirable people with backgrounds hidden

in questionable shadows appeared in the club, but those kinds of people had a usual *look* to them that she did not exhibit a single drop of.

That's it, he thought as he watched her shoulders tighten and her face twist into one of poorly-contained disgust as a consort led her client down the stairs, *she's too normal to be here*.

But who is she?

The thought was swept away when Yosano clapped him on the back, drawing his attention over to where Chuuya was making his way through the crowd over to them with an open expression of happiness on his face that usually was only able to be pried out of him with the strongest of drink (though he supposed music could have much of the same effect), and Dazai unconsciously mirrored the expression as Chuuya dropped in the empty set to Dazai's left, face red with the flush of the heat in the room.

He didn't notice the woman for the rest of the night, nor how her eyes bored into his back like a falcon, never taking her eyes off of their group as they drank and celebrated and talked.

Many hours later, the booming crowd from earlier had dwindled into the night-time dwellers who frequently visited the bottom floor, leaving the main floor open and breathing like lungs freed from water, the coolness of the outside air finally able to seep in from where Ranpo had propped the door open.

While Dazai had been sipping his way through his usual poison of whiskey, Chuuya had- surprisingly- barely touched anything remotely alcoholic, instead alive with the energy from the room left over from his performance. It lit him from the inside out, bringing color to his eyes and his skin, his gloves flashing in the faint silver glitter he'd over dusted on himself (the column of his neck, his cheekbones, his lips) matching the spark of blue studs in his ears; it was stunning and odd, but not unwanted to see this brighter, less cynical side of him, though it wasn't as if he'd lost his sharp tongue entirely.

"Just because I'm short doesn't mean I can't kick your ass," he quipped, arms crossed as he glared at Dazai levelly.

Dazai snorted. "Sure, but I've still got twenty-some centimeters over you, *petit chou*," he replied

plainly, picking at his nails without looking at him.

Chuuya made a frustrated noise, and Dazai smiled faintly as he slid his eyes over toward him. “You’re such an ass,” he finally said, resigned, and Dazai chuckled.

“Mm, perhaps, but it certainly helps that you’re one of the most gullible people I know,” he said, and he heard Yosano snicker next to him.

“No, I’m *not*,” he started, and Yosano’s snicker bubbled into a giggle, making him lean around Dazai to scowl at her, “and Akiko, *don’t* encourage him!”

She crossed her legs daintily, returning the heat of his glare with a pleasant smile. “I assure you I’m doing no such thing, dear,” she said lightly, and Chuuya clicked his tongue.

“Besides, your vest came unbuttoned,” Dazai switched, pointing to Chuuya’s chest.

It took two seconds of silent repressed laughter as Chuuya looked down in confusion, realized his vest was still in fact buttoned properly, and whipped his head back up with irritation on his face to scowl at Dazai.

Both Dazai and Yosano were laughing loudly as he spluttered, and he hooked the edges of his jacket and pulled it closed over him. “*Shut it*,” he hissed, and Dazai snorted. “I’m *not* gullible!”

“Then why are you so embarrassed?” Dazai teased, and Chuuya’s face reddened in punctuation. “Case in point,” he added breezily, and felt the tip of Chuuya’s shoe dig into the side of his thigh.

“Ass,” he repeated venomously, but Dazai ignored him as he drowned the smile on his face in his drink, watching Chuuya flounder as Yosano continued laughing.

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you from up here in the realm of humans,” Dazai said suddenly, setting down his glass and leaning dramatically toward Chuuya with his hand cupped around his ear. “I think a dwarf is speaking to me?”

Chuuya reached out and smacked Dazai’s ear, making him yelp and lurch back as Chuuya grinned

victoriously. Dazai nursed his ear petulantly, trying to ignore how the feeling of silk against the sensitive skin of his ear sent burning sparks down his spine. “I’m not a dwarf, idiot,” Chuuya said, but his attempt at a barb fell flat as the curves of his smile softened it.

“You’re certainly enough of a brute to be one,” Dazai said pathetically, and the smile twisted on Chuuya’s face so quickly that Dazai grinned wickedly.

“If you’re going to fight again, *please* do it outside, because I’m not going to clean up your mess,” Kunikida called tiredly. Chuuya huffed as Dazai waved a hand lazily in Kunikida’s general direction.

“Nah, I think I’m too tired to try and beat Chuuya again,” he said, words pure and innocent like a child proclaiming to their parent that no, it *wasn’t* them who’d eaten all of the cookies from the jar.

“That was *one time!*” Chuuya argued, spreading his hands defensively.

Dazai turned back to him, propping his chin in the palm of his hand to stare back at him. “Once was enough,” he said, and Chuuya bit the inside of his cheek in lieu of a reply.

“Truth be told, I think Chuuya still won in blood,” Yosano said, and Dazai made a noise of defeat as Chuuya smirked.

Indeed, Chuuya *was* the only one who’d drawn blood before they’d finally settled into odd companionship, and Dazai knew the subject wasn’t going to get dropped anytime soon.

“Yeah, but you didn’t have to lick it off your face like an animal,” Chuuya said dryly, and Dazai paused to watch how Chuuya’s face replayed the memory, disgust hiding the tiny blip of emotion Dazai remembered seeing that day.

“Oh?” he said, leaning into Chuuya’s space just enough to see him shift slightly away, the tips of his ears pink. “And here I thought you *liked it*.”

Chuuya made a strangled noise in his throat, not looking at Dazai’s face.

I know he did- it was written all over his face.

(Victory in the taste of knuckles cutting into his teeth, blood seeping between the cut in his lip as he gave Chuuya a dangerous smile, the tang of iron on his tongue tasting sweeter than honey as he watched Chuuya freeze and track the motion, face going red.)

“Don’t be vile,” Chuuya said instead, and Dazai blinked, caught off guard by how cautiously vicious it sounded- like a warning cried out in fear, the lines of his back taut and square and all wrong from his normal languorous curves.

Sensing the uncomfortable shift, Dazai sighed dramatically and laid his head on the bar, extending his arm so that it flopped over the edge of the bar. “How *rude* you are, Chuuya,” he lamented, and he peeked open an eye enough to see Chuuya attempting to hide a smile behind his hand.

“And you’re obnoxious,” he muttered back, words slurred by his gloves, but Dazai could still tell that something was just the slightest bit off, like his energy from earlier had slipped away like the crash of low tide. *What happened? What did I do?*

Behind him, Yosano shifted, and Dazai could feel her concern echoed against where his back was turned toward her. “You should get some rest, Chuuya,” she nudged, but there was the undertone of *‘this isn’t a suggestion’* underneath it.

Chuuya sighed, dragging his hands down his face. “Yeah, maybe I should- it’s late isn’t it? I kinda lost track of time,” he replied, weariness edging away at his words.

Dazai fought the urge to frown at how *tired* he looked all of a sudden.

Yosano hummed. “Then go change and head out before I send Kunikida after you,” she insisted, earning a confused look from the man in question before continuing, “and go check on Atsushi and Akutagawa while you’re at it; I haven’t seen them since earlier.”

Chuuya groaned. “If they made a mess in the lounge *again* I’m going to skin them,” he said, fondness tinting the edges of his irritation.

Dazai sat up then, stretching his arms above his head to feel the bandages around his arms pull in time to the waistcoat around his ribs. “I should probably head out too,” he said, and he saw an odd emotion flit over Chuuya’s face. “But I can escort a certain someone back to their room before heading out,” he added, shooting Yosano a faint look.

“I’m not a child,” Chuuya grouched, but his body language spoke the opposite of his words, relaxed and relieved by Dazai’s words. (Dazai wasn’t sure what to do with the beating wings trapped in his chest.)

Dazai just finished the rest of his drink before chasing Chuuya off of his stool, enjoying the glare he earned as he shooed him. Chuuya, rolling his eyes, eventually slid off and started heading down toward the ramp, pausing to shove his hands in his pockets and give Dazai an expectant look. “Well?”

Yosano subtly pressed her fingers to Dazai’s knee to get his attention, her silent expression a vocalization of *‘take care of him’* that he took to heart, nodding before sliding out of his seat and reaching for Yosano’s hand. “I bid you a good night, my dearest,” he purred sarcastically, and she snorted as he pressed a faux-kiss to the back of her hand.

She waved him off. “Don’t keep him waiting,” she teased, but the slide of concern in her voice didn’t escape him.

He grinned at her before wheeling around, immediately heckling Chuuya about “how much shorter he was at the bottom of a ramp” before joining his side, making their way toward the dressing rooms.

Yosano shook her head with a sigh, turning back toward Kunikida. “Two those, I swear,” she muttered, leaning on the bar top.

Kunikida only raised an eyebrow at her before filling two cups of coffee and sitting beside her, talking amicably for the rest of their time before heading out.

Don’t you dare try and hide from him, Chuuya, she thought, because he isn’t going to let you.

Dazai was chattering Chuuya’s ear off as they made their way through the back halls, hands stuffed in his coat pockets as he walked just behind Chuuya, grinning as he threw barbs over his shoulder to Dazai. They nearly walked past the lounge door when Chuuya paused, gesturing for Dazai to stop. Puzzled, Dazai complied, tilting his head as Chuuya backtracked to the door. “Something wrong?”

Chuuya shook his head. “No, nothing like that; this door’s never usually closed, but it’s quiet,” he explained. Dazai hummed, hands toying with the lint in his pockets. “Give me a minute; I’m gonna go check to see if they’re alive,” Chuuya said, before shooing Dazai out of the way and nudging the door open, slipping inside.

Dazai peeked his head inside, curious to see what the resident violinists were up to, only to pause and chuckle, nearly incredulously: both of them were on the couch, fast asleep, but Atsushi was buried into Akutagawa’s side with his head on his shoulder, music held limply in his fingers resting atop the coat that was stretched over their laps; they both looked content, not a trace of anger on their features as they breathed in time. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen them look that peaceful in each other’s presence in a long time.*

Dazai watched as Chuuya blinked away a look of surprise before shaking his head with a quiet laugh, and Dazai snickered as he leaned against the door frame. “Is Atsushi drooling on his shirt?” he stage-whispered, and Chuuya’s head shot up to fix him with a glare before kneeling down in front of them.

It was then that a shift fell over Chuuya’s face as he reached out to gently shake Atsushi’s knee, a softness that Dazai had only ever seen when he was dead on his feet with exhaustion, but it was undeniable that the air he held when Atsushi blinked his eyes open blearily to look down at Chuuya was nothing less than brotherly and kind. (Dazai stored away the information with a small smile of his own, the notion a warm pulse of affection in his chest like the edges of an elegant jellyfish, warm and ethereal.)

Atsushi was barely awake as Chuuya spoke quietly to him in French, gently chiding him for falling asleep in the lounge, the sound of it soft like a lullaby whispered to night blossoms in dots of barely spoken words. Atsushi mumbled a faint apology, scrubbing at his eye and tucking the gnarled strands of messy hair out of his face. Chuuya laughed, tapping at his knee. “*Just get to your room and sleep well, okay? You both earned it,*” he said, and Atsushi nodded.

Satisfied, Chuuya stood back up, watching as Atsushi peeled away from Akutagawa to shake his shoulder with a faint “Ryuu, wake up,” that made Dazai blink in surprise. Sleepily, Akutagawa leaned back into Atsushi in search of warmth, and Atsushi huffed before swatting lightly at his shoulder. Eventually he stirred, groaning as he cracked open an eye, muttering a croaked “What?”

“C’m on, bed,” Atsushi said blurrily, and Akutagawa just grunted in affirmation as Atsushi hauled him to his feet.

Dazai stepped out of the doorway as Chuuya walked back out to stand beside him, giving Dazai a

questioning look as he looked back toward him. “What?”

Dazai shook his head, the smile on his face only curling higher. “Those two; only a few months ago they were at each other’s throat constantly, and now they’re cuddling and using nicknames,” he said lightly, peeking over Chuuya’s head to see them talking lowly to each other, unaware of the other’s presences.

Chuuya snorted. “Let them be. Honestly, I’m just glad they stopped fighting, ‘cause if I had to clean up rosin one more time I was going to wring their necks,” he said dryly, and Dazai barked a laugh.

“Which is the better alternative, though- having to clean up a mess caused by them arguing, or a mess caused by their incessant urge to-?”

“*Stop*, stop, oh my *god*,” Chuuya cut off, voice strangled and caught between disgust and bursting into laughter. “I really *don’t* need the image in my brain, asshole.”

“Again,” Dazai pointed out, and Chuuya groaned.

“Don’t remind me,” he deadpanned, and Dazai snickered as Chuuya dragged a hand down his face. Dazai moved to lean into the room again, only to be stopped by a hand against his chest that made him freeze for a different reason than intended. “Stop bein’ a voyeur, bastard,” Chuuya chided, hooking his fingers in the crease of Dazai’s waistcoat and tugging him away from the door. Dazai made a noise of complaint as he was suddenly jerked away, and Chuuya snorted before releasing him as he walked toward the end of the hallway.

Dazai followed him obediently, clasping his hands behind him, only stopping to see Atsushi leading an equally-tired Akutagawa out the other way with his hand in his own before they disappeared through the doors to the main room. He smiled to himself before hearing Chuuya bark his name from around the corner, and followed the sound of his voice without another word.

Upon finally reaching Chuuya’s dressing room, he toed the door open to be greeted by the sight of Chuuya- now jacketless- stretching his arms over his head to give Dazai the perfect view of the thin fabric pulling over the planes of his back. Dazai hummed and made his way into the room, ignoring the glare Chuuya shot him from the mirror as Dazai hauled himself up to sit on the edge of the vanity, perching on the corner of the counter curved away from Chuuya. “I have chairs you know,” Chuuya said dryly, but they were more of an observation than a command.

“But it’s more fun to sit up here and watch you,” Dazai said childishly, planting his hands behind him to lean back and swing his feet.

Chuuya snorted dryly as he turned back to the mirror, rolling up his sleeves before he caught Dazai’s eye in the mirror again, the edge of his reflection blurred like a phantasm. “Do you always have to carry that thing with you?” he commented, and Dazai narrowed his eyes in confusion before Chuuya pointed to Dazai’s hip.

Looking down, he realized Dazai was referring to the pistol at his side, normally tucked away under the layers of his jacket now exposed like a the wicked end of a shattered bone. Humming, Dazai hooked a finger under the snap of the front and slipped it out, twirling the metal in his hands effortlessly enough to make Chuuya both flinch and gape at him. “It’s more habit now than anything,” he replied absently, words shallow. *It’s a comfort, knowing I have an escape at my fingertips- one bullet, one touch, and the world will fade from my view.*

He didn’t bother to let Chuuya hear the rest of the thought.

Chuuya raised an eyebrow, but just chose to sigh instead. “Whatever,” he said blandly, before reaching back to tie back and out of his face to begin meticulously cleaning his face of makeup.

(Since when had this become commonplace, me crashing in his dressing room like this? Since when did he trust me so much?)

Dazai blew out a slow breath, reholstering the gun before shutting his eyes and leaning against the wall beside him, closing off the sight of the front door from him. He stayed quiet like that for a moment, just listening to his breathing and the tired ache of sleep pulling at his eyes, but he eventually spoke up again, not wanting to fall asleep. “What inspired your performance today?” he asked, voice slightly scratchy, not opening his eyes.

He could feel Chuuya processing the question, turning it over like a coin in his fingers before replying. “I just happened to like the song,” he mumbled, and Dazai snorted.

“For a show as incredible as that? There *has* to be something more to it than that,” he said casually, and Chuuya froze, “and besides, didn’t you say it was for someone?”

“It was a commemoration for my time here, so it was a thank you to everyone here, like I said,” Chuuya replied, terse, level, and Dazai wasn’t convinced.

“Is that so?” he said, more to himself than anything, and Chuuya huffed through his nose.

“I sang it because I learned to stop giving a damn, and I found something here I never thought I would,” he said, oddly candid for him, and Dazai cracked open an eye to see that the back of his neck was dusted in pink.

“Someone’s sappy,” he teased, and Chuuya gave him a level look from the mirror meant to stave off Dazai’s incessant pressing, but he’d long become immune to it.

“Shut it,” he quipped, but the both of them had stupid grins on their face.

“But you like when I talk to you,” Dazai argued, more an observation than an accusation, but curiously saw the blush from his neck darken and paint his cheeks, and Dazai paused.

“It’d be a blessing if I could tape your mouth shut,” Chuuya said bitterly, “so I don’t know where the hell you got *that* idea from.”

Dazai blinked, processing, before laughing faintly to himself. *Such a bad liar.*

Chuuya flattened his lips into a thin line, propping his hands on his hips. “Something funny?”

Dazai waved him off weakly, humor painting his face in a lazy smile. “Nothing at all,” he said, and Chuuya waited, staring at Dazai through the mirror. Dazai sighed and took the bait, knowing Chuuya wouldn’t back down. “Your face is just really red right now,” he ceded, enjoying the second it took for Chuuya’s eyes to flicker toward himself and widen before his blush dipped down into the collar of his shirt.

In the end, Dazai was so overcome with laughter as Chuuya spluttered that he wasn’t able to ask about the ghost he mentioned in his address, and wasn’t able to try and pry the truth from Chuuya’s fingers about why he sang such a song of reinvention and realization for *him*, completely unbeknownst to Chuuya.

(He’d curse himself later, as selfish as it was.)

Later, while Dazai was ribbing Chuuya for the fastidiousness he had in removing the makeup from his face, a knock sounded on the door, interrupting them both. Both paused, and Chuuya knit his eyebrows as he turned toward Dazai, who only shrugged. Sighing, Chuuya pushed away from the mirror to face the door. "It's probably just Atsushi," he said, and Dazai snickered as he called a loud "*I'm not picking the lock for you again if you've lost your key!*" toward the door as he disappeared from Dazai's view. Dazai just shut his eyes and leaned back against the wall again, thinking about what he needed to do when he got home (not that the promise of cold and lonely darkness and was anything enticing to him).

He wasn't expecting to hear the faintest of shuddering gasps in Chuuya's voice as the door creaked open, nor the feeling of ice chilling the homey and relaxed pocket of warmth the two had created the second Chuuya said the words "What are you doing here, *Mère?*" that were spoken like a plea to the face of the Reaper.

Dazai's eyes flew open, body on high alert.

Another voice clicked her tongue disapprovingly before speaking. "*It's sounds so horrid when you speak that foul language to me,*" she said, her French acidic but honeyed as sweet as the deadliest of poisons. Even out of his view, Dazai could feel her presence, heavy and titanic but as light as razor wire.

He didn't *dare* move.

"Why are you here?" Chuuya repeated, ignoring her reproachful comment, thin and carefully placed like someone inches from the edge of a ship's bow into stormy waters below. "What do you want?"

He heard the faint lilt of a laugh before she continued. "Why so suspicious, my dear?" she asked, switching languages to reveal an accent like silk over a blade, and Dazai's heart stopped as he recognized the same slide in Chuuya's words when he was just exhausted enough. "I'm your mother; you have no right to take that tone with me."

Dazai could feel something ugly curling in his chest as she spoke, her words condescending and arrogant, confused by how Chuuya hadn't spoken a single word against her.

"It's been eight years since we last met, so why bother now?" Chuuya finally said, and Dazai could glaringly hear his attempt at spiteful nonchalance. "You didn't seem to care back then."

“Don’t you dare talk back to me,” she warned dangerously, and Dazai’s teeth ground together as he finally slipped off of the vanity, anger pushing his hands into his pockets as he stepped from around the corner.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said coldly, looking up at her, “but is there something you need?”

“Don’t, Dazai,” Chuuya protested weakly, and Dazai’s chest lurched as he heard just how small his words were.

The woman smiled darkly, and Dazai looked back to her, recognition clicking in his mind as he studied her features, drawing a smile over his own face that was nothing more than a baring of teeth, dangerous and sharp.

Undeniably, it was the mystery woman who’d been in the corner of the bar the entire night, and now that Dazai could see her face he could read perfectly the cruelty in her features: pale as the moon with hair like white-gold cornsilk, she was the picture of elegance in the shape of a weapon, but unlike the dangerous beauty of Kouyou- who taught that beauty was used to disarm and charm, this woman was nothing but a haggard soul beneath, with creases of anger and disgust around her eyes and an ugly, washed-out sheen to her flesh.

But, of everything about her, it was her *eyes* that threw Dazai off:

Unmistakably blue, gently curving and open to read of the turmoil within, they were *identical* to Chuuya’s-

But hers were sharp and cold like ice, not holding an ounce of the lovely warmth that Dazai had written pages upon pages of poetry on.

She straightened herself up, staring at Dazai for a second longer before looking back to her son. “*And who is this?*” she asked, and Dazai realized that Chuuya wasn’t meeting her eyes. Dazai could read the loaded question behind her words, the secondary subtle disgust there that made Dazai’s hair stand on end.

“A friend,” Chuuya said quietly, small as if he’d been scolded.

Dazai’s heart lurched as tiny pieces began to fit together, one by one like needles under his skin.

She regarded Dazai once more with a wry twist of her lips. “I see,” she hummed, and Chuuya’s

fingers curled against his side. (Dazai wanted nothing more than to interlace them in his own.)

“Why are you here?” Dazai repeated, and she sighed, silvery and delicate and piercing.

“I’d caught word of a lovely club singer of late, one that had people utterly charmed, and when I heard the name, I just had to come see the truth with my own eyes,” she replied, “but in all honesty, I shouldn’t have been surprised, considering he’s always had such a talent for *drama*.”

Blunt and harsh, her voice dipped into a flat tone that made Chuuya wince and Dazai’s eyes go wide.

Why isn’t he saying anything?

“Ma’am, I think it might be best that you leave,” Dazai tried slowly, but she only turned to him with venom in her eyes.

“Do *not* interfere in matters you know nothing about,” she admonished, the quiet words somehow more deafening than if they were yelled.

“*Mère*,” Chuuya cut in, but it was a flimsy attempt at best- uncharacteristic, off-kilter, *broken* .
Too quiet.

Her lips flattened into a sharp line, disappointment on her face. “I should punish you for running away from me like that,” she said thinly, breathed out like sigh, a matter of fact, and Dazai was beyond horrified as Chuuya curled inward, hands fisting in the sides of his pants. It was the opposite of everything that Dazai had ever seen when it came to Chuuya: when pushed, Chuuya always *bit*, venomous and fiery, a wildfire that blazed without a match, but this? This was resignation, defeat, and it struck Dazai to the bone because of how *wrong* it was. Dazai wanted to reach out and place his hand against his back, to comfort him, to ask him *what is going on?* Because out of everything he’d ever seen of Chuuya, of every side, *this* was the part of him that terrified him the most.

“I should have known from the beginning what trouble you would have caused me, yet here I was hoping that you might have changed,” she continued, flat and condescending, “it seems that you’ve only further disappointed me.”

Chuuya’s breath slipped, fingers tightening into fabric.

“You had such high expectations, but then you went sneaking around with that *boy*, shaming me and your father because of you-”

“*We were **thirteen!***” Chuuya finally snapped, but it was a dry, desperate anger that slipped from his tongue like a failing mantra that scorched the normally liquid shape of his French.

“*You were old enough to know what was a sin and what wasn’t,*” she said levelly back, and his eyes widened. “*But I was softer on you than I should have been.*”

“*You treated me like I was a slave!*” Chuuya fired back, and she clicked her tongue.

“*I disciplined you for your insolence,*” she corrected coolly, before her eyes flickered toward his hands, still curled in his gloves. “*But it seems that you hid my lessons instead of learning from them.*”

What does she mean- his gloves?

“Please, just stop,” Chuuya tried weakly, but she ignored him.

“*If only I had known, known that you would become like this, been such a-*” the final word was one that Dazai didn’t recognize, some slip of a vernacular he wasn’t familiar with, but he could understand the disgust, the vile, slanted connotation behind it and how cruelly it cut, as Dazai had heard variations of the same sentiment over the years but he’d been able to ignore it-

But his heart turned to ash as he saw Chuuya’s eyes go wide, face going pale as his breath hitched before it narrowed in pure *rage*, and before Dazai had a chance to take a breath Chuuya’s arm was raising with the intent to strike, but his mother’s face was nothing but flat and empty and expectant.

“That’s *enough*,” Dazai barked as he snatched Chuuya’s wrist, feeling his entire body go stiff in shock at the touch, and swore he heard a slip of a strangled gasp catch in Chuuya’s throat. “You’d only give her what she wants.” Chuuya’s fingers just clenched, lowering his head, and Dazai felt his shoulders shaking as his breathing slid unevenly, lowering his arm; Dazai didn’t let go of his hand.

Small, defeated, like a beaten child, like a scolded little boy-

He resorts to rage and violence because it's the only thing he has, because the last thing he's allowed to show is weakness.

"You still hide behind others, even now," she said plainly, "and you haven't grown like I hoped you would." Chuuya tried to speak, only for the words to die in his throat as Dazai squeezed his hand in a silent restraint. Dazai heard his breath hitch before yanking his hand out of Dazai's. She tracked the motion with a wry smile, one that made Dazai's expression sharpen into nothing short of razored obsidian.

"Get out." His words weren't a request, nor a gentle suggestion, but a laser pointed directly at her chest. *Don't push me.*

She scoffed. "Excuse me?" she laughed, patronizing, but the expression on Dazai's face didn't waver. "You're just another back-alley rat; you have no right to interfere between the matters of a mother and her child."

"You're no *mother* of his," he said levelly, tilting his head back toward her to watch her face widen in shock. "You had no reason to come here aside from the chance to ridicule and mock your own child to serve your ego."

"How *dare* you-"

"You don't view him as a son but as an outlet to dehumanize and attack," he continued. "He is an adult man, *not* a child- so *leave*, before I remove you."

"You impudent child," she whispered, eyes narrowed in fury. "You have no right to ask me to *leave*."

Dazai felt a smirk curl over his face, lifting the edge of his lips to bare his teeth in a humourless smile. "It's funny how you think I'm asking," he said, shifting the edge of his jacket to flash the barest hint of the holster at his hip. "*Get. Out.*"

Finally, her face shifted into something as ugly as her words, snarled and twisted as she hissed obscenities at Dazai, but he stood his ground.

There wasn't a shred of patience or a modicum of kindness in his eyes, enough to strip flesh from

bone.

Eventually, she made a vile noise in her throat, clutching her coat tighter around her before turning sharply on her heel, hand on the door before pausing to look back at Chuuya, narrowing her eyes at him before clicking her tongue. “*Répugnant*,” she muttered under her breath, and Chuuya flinched before she let the door slam shut behind her.

‘*Disgusting.*’

Dazai blew out a deep-seated breath as he shut his eyes, only to open them to turn toward Chuuya, whose hands were balled into fists as he hid behind the loose strands of hair curling into his face. “Chuuya,” Dazai said gently, reaching out a hand toward his shoulder, only to retract it as Chuuya flinched violently away.

“*Don’t*,” he said sharply, but Dazai’s breath caught as he heard the edge of tears blurring his words, ashamed and *hurt*. “Just don’t, I can’t even-” his words dissolved into a sharp inhale as he buried his hands into his face. *Don’t look at me.*

“Chuuya,” Dazai breathed, “look at me, please.” Chuuya shook his head, stepping backward, but Dazai reached forward until he had his hands around his shoulders. “Don’t hide from me.” Chuuya made a noise of complaint, but the second Dazai reached him he pulled him as tightly against his chest as he could, and Chuuya *melted*.

He fell into him, *collapsed* into him the second he felt Dazai’s arms around him, and Dazai had to carefully ease them both to the ground lest he let Chuuya fall, and Dazai felt Chuuya’s hands curve around him until they were fisted so tightly in the back of Dazai’s coat that he faintly wondered if it might tear. It was then that Chuuya finally allowed himself to cry, shaking and broken in a tide of hurt he’d long tried to bury, and Dazai’s heart shattered as familiar words of letters past penned started to crystallize-

“But if you could see what truly lies within this heart of mine, I’m afraid you may just be disgusted”-

Shifting and solidifying as Chuuya clung desperately to Dazai, shredding the delicate and raw edges of his abused heartstrings-

“Pride is on the line and I’m afraid I don’t have much of it left to spare”-

Until it split it open and *bled*.

*“Show me the way to feel without it feeling **wrong**.”*

There were scars running deep under Chuuya’s skin that Dazai could barely have imagined, such horrible wounds he must have tried so hard to bury that they were ripped back to the surface, and he could feel the shame and fear coiling around him because of it. He wanted to fix it, to make the hurt stop, as selfish as it was, but Chuuya was like a flame held within a delicate set of scales, held over an ocean of kerosene: if pushed, if shifted the wrong way, he would set everything around him aflame to keep anyone from getting too close, even if it meant destroying himself in the process.

Oh, Chuuya- why did fate decide to be so cruel to you?

(To us?)

Chuuya’s breathing slowed then, and he pushed back up, sliding away from Dazai with the intent to distance himself as far as he could before Dazai reached out a hand to place it on Chuuya’s thigh, stopping him. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, keeping his eyes shut, but Dazai could see the mix of tears and shame reddening his face. “You shouldn’t have seen that.”

Dazai sighed lightly, shaking his head. “Don’t apologize,” he said, and Chuuya peeked at him. “I don’t know what happened when you were young, but it wasn’t fair.”

Chuuya blinked before his eyes widened in realization. “Shit- *shit*, now you know that I’m, I’m not-” he dropped his face into his drawn up knees with a mortified groan, trying to hide.

Dazai knit his eyebrows. “Not what?” he asked, genuinely confused.

Chuuya turned his head away, the action smearing silver sparkles onto the fabric of his pants. “Not *normal*,” he spit.

Dazai tilted his head. “What do you mean?” *Does he mean...?*

“Not straight,” Chuuya eventually whispered, soft like a psalm of regret, and Dazai nearly laughed aloud. Chuuya whipped his head back around with a vicious “What?” that made Dazai realize he actually *did* laugh, and he tried to wave him off as he snickered.

“I already knew *that*,” Dazai snorted, and Chuuya’s eyes went wide.

“*Huh?* What the hell does *that* mean?” he demanded, pulling his head up to glare at him, and Dazai just gave him a grin.

“It means that it’s fairly obvious,” he said bluntly, watching Chuuya’s ears go red, “from the clothes and the makeup, it isn’t hard to gather a guess.”

Chuuya looked a horrible mix of furious and embarrassed, mouth opening and closing before he blurted out a sharp “son of a *bitch*.”

Dazai could sense the terror crawling under Chuuya’s skin, nervous and jumpy as he tried to back away, but Dazai just reached out to gently grasp his wrist. “I’m the last person to judge you, if that’s what you’re worried about, however,” he added quietly, and Chuuya froze.

“What do *you* know?” he accused, but he didn’t try to pull away from Dazai’s grip. “You’ve only ever been interested in *women*.”

Dazai didn’t say anything, only humming with an odd little grin on his face as he traced the edge of Chuuya’s glove.

Chuuya’s mouth fell open. “Wait- you...?”

Dazai’s grin spread further, teasing. “I’m a man of many tastes,” he answered simply, and Chuuya choked in surprise.

“*What?*” he breathed, and Dazai snorted, “but I’ve only ever seen you go after women- so, how...?”

Dazai sighed, patting Chuuya’s leg. “You’re not the only one who’s been called disgusting things simply because of taste,” he said lightly, and Chuuya’s face fell. “But speaking of your..... mother, she mentioned a boy-” he saw Chuuya tense up- “who was he?”

Chuuya fidgeted, but the expression on his face was less of guilt and more of childish embarrassment, a soft blush on his face, and Dazai realized just who he might have been- *a childhood crush?*

“He was our neighbor,” he started quietly, a faint smile nipping at his lips, and Dazai felt a small spark of delight in his chest at the sight of it. “He was so kind, and was a good friend of mine since he moved in when I was ten. When I was older, I realized he made me feel... funny-” Dazai smiled despite himself- “but it took a bit more until I, ah, figured out what it was, but it was... good, I thought.”

“What was his name?” Dazai led on, trying to keep him talking.

Chuuya ducked his head. “Koichi,” he said, biting at his lip. “He had dark hair, and soft brown eyes, and sort of reminds me of...” he looked up at Dazai, the final word dying on his lips in realization, and Dazai could read just what he nearly said: *He reminds me of you.*

Dazai’s breath hitched, surprised, and Chuuya backpedaled, trying to erase his blunder. “*Uh*, I, um, yeah, so...” he sucked in a breath, and Dazai raised an eyebrow.

“And?” Dazai pressed, and Chuuya grumbled, ducking his head, but Dazai could see the pink creeping up the side of his face. “I’m sorry, what was that? I couldn’t catch that.”

He was expecting Chuuya to snap at him, to ignore him, but he wasn’t expecting the small and sad smile that spread over his face. “When we were thirteen, he was my first kiss,” he admitted shyly, and Dazai felt almost jealous, but Dazai didn’t miss how Chuuya’s face fell, and he swallowed the teasing quip that had been on the tip of his tongue back down.

“What happened?”

Chuuya’s fingers tightened in the fabric on his pants, and he tugged away the wrist that Dazai was holding. “My mother found us,” he whispered, “pulled us apart, demanding to know what we were doing, telling us we were to be punished.” He swallowed. “I never saw him again after that, and my mother... I think she stopped loving me then.”

Chuuya gnawed on his lip, shutting his eyes, and Dazai felt his stomach lurch as he felt him shaking, a flare of rage resurfacing. “What did she do?” he asked levelly, thinly, dangerously. “Did she beat you?”

Chuuya shook his head frantically. “No, she never laid a hand on me, never raised her voice once, never did anything that could leave marks she could be blamed for, but my father turned a blind eye as she treated me like garbage, making me work and clean until my hands...” he couldn’t finish the sentence as his voice shook, pulling his hands in toward him.

Dazai extended a hand toward him, nudging his fingers gently against the skin just above Chuuya’s wrists, asking silent permission. Chuuya clenched his fingers for a second in hesitation, before he held out both of his hands like he was being taken away in handcuffs. Carefully, Dazai peeled away the gray fabric, revealing inch after pale inch of skin he’d never seen before, and Chuuya kept talking. “She always told me if I was to act and look like a woman then she’d treat me like one, made me do chores even *she* refused to do and didn’t care when I burned or cut or rubbed my hands raw, over and over again.” Dazai’s breath turned to ice as he saw scars upon scars covering his hands, thin spidery lines crisscrossing over each other, blending into blotchy burn scars and edges of sections that had been picked and torn open by small fingers, itchy and in pain. His hands, small enough to fit in Dazai’s own, were a mosaic of white and pink and skin, but were *human*, and he suspected that the wounds Chuuya saw there were only magnified further into monstrosities in his eyes.

“She cut my hair short like she kept her own, and never once let me leave the house unless it was for errands, but it was never anything enough to tell someone, and eventually I just left, and ran away, until I ran into Akiko, who was working with her father at the butcher shop then. She let me stay with the both of them, kind enough to not try and pry into what happened, but then she had to leave for the war, and...” He was shaking again, eyes squeezing shut. “I’m sorry, I’m being stupid.”

Oh, if only he knew how much I care.

Dazai hummed instead, cupping his hands around Chuuya’s and thumbing the edges of the soft skin, feeling Chuuya shift- but he didn’t pull his hands away. “For the record,” Dazai said plainly, pulling one of Chuuya’s hands toward him and pressing a gentle kiss to the center of his palm, “I love your hands.”

Lifting his head, Dazai felt a burst of pride in his chest to see that Chuuya was solid red and gaping at him, and shot him a purely shit-eating grin as Chuuya snatched his hands away to shove them petulantly under his arms. “Don’t say stupid things,” he said bitterly, and Dazai only laughed.

“Thank you,” Dazai said instead, and Chuuya paused.

“What do you mean?”

The teasing grin on Dazai's face softened. "For telling me; I know it couldn't have been easy."

Chuuya squinted. "Why are you acting so weird?" he asked, and Dazai tilted his head.

"What do you mean?"

Chuuya clicked his tongue. "You're being nice, and it's just disarming," he said. "I thought you'd just make fun of me."

Dazai scoffed. "I'm *always* this nice," he teased, and Chuuya kicked him, making him yelp.

"Don't be an ass," he bit out, but there was an undeniable smile on his face that made the dark corners of Dazai's heart shrink away for just a second. "You just surprised me, is all."

"Well, I always aim to please, *petit chou*," Dazai said, earning another smack as Chuuya muttered various profanities from both languages.

Eventually, Dazai pulled them both off of the floor, complaining that his ass hurt because Chuuya just *had* to collapse on the carpet, and Chuuya only rolled his eyes, ignoring him.

There were scars hidden in them both, ugly and twisted, but Dazai didn't care. He knew Chuuya was still scared, still hesitant, and Dazai wanted nothing more than to kiss him goodbye as he left, but settled for another teasing quip thrown over his shoulder solely to hear Chuuya's voice one more time before he was left to his own lonely devices.

Hands in the pockets of his overcoat and eyes down toward the cracks in the road below him, he felt as he'd left with another piece of Chuuya within his hands. The words of Chuuya's last letter echoed painfully in his heartbeat, his footsteps, and he realized now:

Chuuya *despised* being small, associating it with being weak and feminine, lost to the thumb of his mother's abuse, hated being reminded that he'd never be the societal standard of masculine, but in his own opinion, those reasons that Chuuya hated himself were the aspects that Dazai *adored*. He loved the pale skin, his voice, his hair, and the shape of him that reminded Dazai how perfectly he could fit in his arms, loved the brash temper and loud temperament and sharp tongue, loved all of

the things that Chuuya had been taught to abhor.

If only *Chuuya* could see that.

(*“Enseigne-moi l’impossible, Enseigne-moi l’impossible, Enseigne-moi l’impossible”-*

Teach me the impossible, teach me the impossible, teach me the impossible-

“Show me to the light.”)

They never brought up the incident after that, but it was clear that something had changed for the better: while Dazai was still rude and ostentatious from time to time, he knew which boundaries not to cross, and Chuuya’s temper was kept in better check, cooled slightly like a spell. They still bickered and had spats, of course, but anyone could see the small smiles they had here and there, jokes and quips kept between them.

On top of it, Dazai noticed that Chuuya was very subtly more touchy, physical from time to time, whether it was just touches to Dazai’s shoulders and back or tugging on the edges of his coats and sometimes his tails either in smothered affection or irritation, but Dazai *noticed*; it was as if a tiny piece of Chuuya had been taught to trust once again, less cautious, less hesitant- small, but a start.

At the moment, however, Dazai had his jacket wrapped completely around Chuuya’s face as he swore and tried to smack Dazai, but he only leaned on top of his head with an innocent expression as he ordered from a very-tired Kunikida. “Hm, how about a French 75 today? I think I could do with a little gin, but you better make it two *and* with your best champagne.”

Kunikida sighed deeply, propping a hand on his hip. “I’m not your servant, you know,” he said dryly, but Dazai just smiled serenely at him as a particularly loud swear escaped from the depths of Dazai’s pinstriped jacket. Kunikida raised an eyebrow, and Dazai mouthed a ‘Yes?’ at him that made him shake his head. “You’re going to have to make do with bitters instead of lemon juice,” he ceded, before shifting to start making the drinks.

It was at that moment that Chuuya landed a fairly sharp blow to Dazai’s gut, making him stagger back with a moan as he clutched his stomach. Chuuya smirked at him as he wheezed, and Dazai’s

eyes watered. “What, do you sharpen your elbows?” he complained, and Chuuya fixed the edge of his glove- jet black today to offset the light grays of the rest of his ensemble- while he ignored Dazai.

“You were crushing my hat, idiot,” he said, and Dazai just snorted.

“Good riddance then,” he replied, watching Chuuya roll his eyes as Dazai sat down beside him, pulling one of his legs up to tuck it under his thigh. Chuuya glared at him before huffing out a breath.

“Where’s Akiko?” he asked, propping his chin on his hand. “I wanted to see her before I had to go back and get ready for the next show.”

Dazai shrugged. “Not sure; she didn’t say anything to me the night before,” he replied, and Chuuya clicked his tongue. Dazai slid his eyes over to him curiously. “What, is my presence tiring you?” He made an irritated noise in his throat, turning his head away from Dazai. Dazai hummed and leaned over toward Chuuya, setting his chin on Chuuya’s shoulder until he was close enough to feel the heat from his pink ears. “Well?”

Chuuya was interrupted from answering as Kunikida set the two drinks down more harshly than necessary, making Dazai jump away from Chuuya, startled, only to gleefully reach for one of the glasses. “She’s going to be a bit late as she has some last-minute business with her father,” Kunikida answered, giving Dazai a testy look as he slid his glass far away from Kunikida’s clutches. “She should be here soon.”

Dazai took a sip of his drink, humming delightedly when he realized Kunikida had indeed used some of his nicer champagnes. He saw Chuuya eye the glass suspiciously before Dazai flapped a hand at him in encouragement, and he eventually sighed before pulling it over toward him and taking a taste, lighting up the minute it hit his tongue. Dazai smiled to himself before finishing, Kunikida shaking his head as he watched the entire exchange.

They sat quietly like that for a while, simply talking aimlessly as they nursed their drinks while the world around them kept moving, yet both of their hearts beat crookedly in worried anticipation, for tonight was to be a benchmark for both of them-

A meeting.

Tonight was the night that a ghost made a promise to appear, to be named, though Dazai's request was in much sweeter words despite how much ink he'd smeared over himself in anxiety as he tried to pen the letter:

"Many months have passed since I first reached out to you, and with every note I wonder if I should press the very message into your hand myself instead of passing it through another's touch and another's mouth. Call me selfish, but I wish to end such a cat and mouse game and see you face to face, so that you can finally catch my eye.

Indeed, call me a selfish man, but I wish to hold your hand within my own.

Would that be alright?

-Astilbe Arendsii"

The blossom he'd attached to it was a sheaf of feathery white flowers, a gentle message like a brush to the cheek of *'I will be waiting here for you'*.

He'd been terrified, nervous as all hell the minute he'd handed it off to Yosano, only to be flabbergasted when he received a reply in less than two days, and had the breath shaken from his lungs:

" Mon Cher Fantôme,

so the master of spectacles

And the master of spectres

decided to show his earthly presence to one of such meeker stance?

for surely i must be mistaken-

if you really wish to see me, i suppose i cannot refuse,

but this time you will go with my ruse, though not a rose-

a blood-red flower, the shade of desire, the shade of patience and longing-

bring your heart to me, perhaps, o ghost.

le tiens, N.C.”

He'd been shocked, to say the least, for he thought it would have taken much more wheedling on his part to shake Chuuya from his shell, but after Chuuya had shattered in front of him, there was some strange fire that had been lit within him, a revitalized passion that was echoed in the smiles that trickled over his face in blinding streaks of ichor that appeared so much more frequently than before-

“ I learned to stop giving a damn”-

Well, I suppose he has.

Within the next exchange, they agreed upon a date, to meet a week later after Chuuya's Saturday performance, where Dazai would wait in the alley behind the club with Chuuya's flower of choice in hand.

While their letters betrayed barely a hint of trepidation, keeping their hearts guarded from each other in real time as they waited and waited. Chuuya was a messy combination of nerves and glee that made him a fidgeting mess of tapping and fingers and bouncing knees, hence why Dazai had bought the drink for him in an attempt to soothe just a fraction of his nervous energy, and was delighted to see that it worked for just a second.

Being the ass he was, Dazai couldn't resist a little bit of button pushing to ease his own nerves, and laid his head onto his crossed his arms before calling a lazy “Oi, Chuuya,” across the surface of the bar.

Chuuya's eyes flickered over to him. “What do you want?” he asked dryly, sipping again at his drink.

“Tell me why you're being so weird,” Dazai said, and Chuuya started, surprise flashing in his eyes before he kissed his teeth.

“I'm not being weird, idiot,” he fired back, but it was tired and more laid-back than usual.

“Uh-huh, and I'm not a Gemini,” Dazai retorted, seeing Chuuya give Kunikida an exhausted look out of the corner of his eyes. “Is there something wrong?”

Chuuya blew a breath through his nose. “No, nothing like that,” he answered, and cut off Dazai the minute he saw his head perk up with a sharp “and no, I’m not telling you no matter how much you whine at me,” that made Dazai pout, first at Chuuya before he directed it at Kunikida, who just gave him a flat look.

Dazai was only halfway through whining the first syllable of Kunikida’s name when Tanizaki weaved his way over to them with his notebook open with orders, and Kunikida had a physical look of relief the minute he heard Tanizaki call for him, immediately leaving the two despite Dazai reaching dramatically for him. Chuuya only snickered as Dazai dropped his face into the bar with a groan. “You’re an idiot,” he drawled, and Dazai flipped him off, only making Chuuya laugh harder.

With a loud sigh disguising obvious amusement, a high voice called a scolding “if Kunikida sees you he’s going to be upset,” as Yosano arrived, dropping down beside Dazai to swat at the offending hand.

Dazai lifted his head and pouted at her this time. “But Chuuya’s being *mean*,” he whined.

Yosano looked over his head to Chuuya, who just shrugged and said “I just called him an idiot,” making Dazai fake snuffle.

She patted his shoulder gently. “The truth is harsh, sweetheart,” she said saccharinely, and Dazai’s jaw dropped as Chuuya snorted into his glass, caught off guard.

“How *dare* you, my love?” Dazai whined dramatically, leaning over until his back was pressed into her shoulder, head lolling back until he was looking up at the ceiling. “How could you, such a fair spring blossom, such a lovely blood-red rose be so *cold*?”

Chuuya made a rather unattractive sound in his throat as Yosano fixed Dazai with a dry look, eyebrow raising. “Considering I’ve seen you write before, that was only some of the *worst* verse you’ve ever tried to pull,” she said flatly, and Dazai gasped.

“You dare insult my poetry skills?” he whispered, and she snorted.

“Stick to freeverse,” she suggested, and Dazai saw Chuuya bite his lip in an attempt not to laugh. “I think Chuuya could give you a run for your money poem-wise anyway,” she added, and Chuuya whipped his head toward her with a warning look.

“Akiko...” he said lowly, and with the elegant words Chuuya had gifted him with, and he grinned to himself privately.

Yosano held her hands up in mock surrender, her gloves a dusty gray today. “You know it’s true,” she said, and he narrowed his eyes at her, Dazai watching curiously as he digested Chuuya’s reaction. Chuuya’s face flashed a silent message of ‘*drop it*’ and she sighed, shoving Dazai off of her and making him yelp in protest before reaching into her coat pocket and extracting a thin box. “And to soothe that temper of yours, I have a good luck charm for you,” she called, sliding the box across the bar until it bumped into Chuuya’s glass, the burgundy of the soft velvet corners catching Dazai’s attention. “Since you’ve been talking about getting some of those anyway.”

Blinking in surprise, Dazai watched as Chuuya cautiously picked up the box and popped the lid with his thumb, eyes widening as a faint gasp slipped from his mouth. “Akiko, you shouldn’t have,” he said with faint admonishment, but his eyes- soft and in awe- didn’t leave the box, “it was just a passing fancy.”

She flapped a hand at him. “You deserve nice things too, you know,” she argued, and he sighed.

Dazai, curious, snuck a hand forward to try and pluck the box from Chuuya’s hands, only succeeding in having it tugged away from his grasp as Chuuya hastily snapped it shut. Dazai pouted. “Won’t you show me?” he wheedled, and Chuuya’s cheeks went pink in irritation.

“No,” he said sharply, and Dazai sighed *loudly* before flopping face-first into the bar.

“No one loves me! Not a single soul in this city bustling with life!” he declared, albeit muffled, and could practically *hear* the eye roll from Yosano.

“Well, that’s the first thing you’ve gotten correct all day,” she said airily, and Dazai lurched up in his seat to gape at her incredulously, only pausing for a second in his act as he heard full-blown peals of laughter from behind him knocking his breath off-kilter.

“*Yosano!*” he cried. She batted her eyelashes at him innocently, and he flattened his lips, reaching out to take a sip of his drink only to discover he’d already finished it. Chuuya continued snickering, and Dazai gave him a sly look from the corner of his eye like the hungry look of a cat, a spark of delight warm in his stomach as his expression alone made Chuuya freeze, breathless. “Well, do you have a *correction* you’d like to make, *petit chou?*” he purred, heavy with innuendo, and watched as three shades of red- one anger, one embarrassment, and one something akin to *heat*- flushed over

Chuuya's face.

For a second, Chuuya fought to say something, but instead settled for finishing his drink and sliding out of his seat. "I should get ready," he said tersely, his tone obvious that Dazai had rattled him, and the realization made Dazai giddy.

"Good luck!" Yosano called cheerily as Chuuya folded his coat over his arm as and carefully picked up the box, shooting Dazai a faintly venomous look before winding his way through the aisle toward the stage door.

Dazai shut his eyes and blew out a deep breath, feeling an ache of nerves in his stomach flutter and churn once more, sliding his hands through his hair.

Yosano huffed a laugh, tapping at the table with her nails, the sound muted through the fabric of her gloves. "You know, with how much you torment him, it's almost incredible that *he's* the one you've been infatuated with since *winter*," she said dryly.

He didn't bother deigning her with an answer, keeping his eyes shut as he sighed again.

"You think you're ready?" she spoke up again, and he cracked open an eye. "I mean, it was a bit abrupt for the both of you to suggest a meeting."

He laughed voicelessly, more like a weak whisper, a faint and wry declaration. "It's rather painful to know that he's right here but doesn't *see* me," he admitted, dropping one of his hands to rest his chin in the palm of his other. "I didn't want to wait anymore."

He could see the quip on her tongue, but she shook her head in amusement before replying. "You do realize he's going to be furious, right?" she said, and he gnawed on his lip.

He'd entertained every possible outcome, but it always circled back to the same one-

Dazai *knew* Chuuya, knew how he hated to be toyed with, made to be the fool, and put up with it in the shallower regards, but when it came to feelings?

Well, Dazai was worried Chuuya would think it would have just been a game to set him up and tear him into pieces.

*(It never was, never **will** be-)*

“Well then, maybe I should have given *you* a good luck charm instead,” Yosano continued, pulling Dazai from the worry he’d entrenched himself in.

“What’d you give him anyway?” Dazai asked.

Yosano flashed a smile. “You’ll just have to wait and see, now won’t you, dear?”

Dazai groaned loudly and buried his head in his arms atop the bar to the sound of Yosano’s raucous laughter.

(The flower he’d bought earlier burned in his breast pocket, its red petals humming and scorching in a waltz that was just a beat too little, in need of a partner.

It’s either sink or swim.)

Now, Dazai waited with his back pressed into the brick of the wall behind him, hands in the pocket of his jacket as he shut his eyes and leaned his head back. Letting a sigh slip from his lips, he breathed in the scent of the warm air humming in between the cracks of the city, the alleys of the city; it was summer now, and its heaviness seeped into his skin and warmed the edges of his chest frozen from the coolness of the club inside. He could smell rain in the distance, sharp and wet, and while its scent normally soothed his aching soul, it did nothing to lessen the chill of iron nerves tight in stomach.

Dazai normally prided himself on always being two steps of everything, a prophet of his own arrogant making, but now, when it came to the person he could read inside and out, he realized he had no idea what could possibly happen-

And, well, it *terrified* him.

(He laughed at the stupidity of a human, human heart.

War had seemed so much easier than this, when he’d been able to just shut off the part of humanity in his mind that processed *morality*.)

He'd slipped out into the back alley just as Ranpo's voice had begun to trickle through the crowd to announce Chuuya's entrance, and gnawed at the inside of his cheek as he could hear the audience's reaction to the performance but not Chuuya himself, strangely but acutely jealous. He hissed out another sharp breath, petulant and irritated.

He's not yours to own.

He may not even want you in the first place.

He numbed himself with a lullaby of insecurity and anxiety tuned in the warmth of the night air, trying desperately to hold onto the giddy pocket of excitement that pulsed and squirmed in his chest.

Eventually the sounds of applause rattled through the door beside him, and his stomach twisted, sharp like white lighting. *It'll be time soon.*

He sighed, digging the back of his head further into the brick as he shoved his hands deeper into the lining of his pockets, listening to the sound of his breath between his teeth and the heartbeat pounding in his ears.

One breath- in, out.

Two- out, hold, in.

Three-

The door creaked open hesitantly, and Dazai cracked open an eye in curiosity, tilting his head toward the person behind it. He swallowed down the hitch in his breath as Chuuya's silhouette emerged hesitantly onto the step down into the alley. Instead, he peered up at him, taking in the sight of his outfit for the night in surprise: instead of his typical suits, Chuuya had decided on something more exotic, dressed in a dark, wine-red yukata that draped and dripped from his shoulders to expose the pale skin there as well as the dip of his breastbone revealed by the low and dangerous slide of the loose folds of fabric. His hair was pulled up into a messy updo with strands of hair undone and curling around his face, held up by two bone-white *kanzashi* sticks pushed through, a small red bead dangling from the bases of both sticks. Hands clad in red the same shade of the yukata fiddled with the edges of the long sleeves, and ruby stones once again glittered in his ears. Dazai could also see the edge of swept-out red at the corners of his eyes and the shimmer of something wet on his lips.

He looks like a geisha, Dazai thought, though ten times more dangerous.

Opening his other eye and fixing him with a passive look, Dazai hummed in question. “Looking for something?” he asked plainly, praying his tongue wouldn’t come unbound of the cursed bonds he’d tied it with.

Chuuya paused, blinked, looking around subtly before his face fell. Sighing quietly, he turned back to Dazai, rearranging his face into neutral annoyance. “What are you doing here, Dazai?” he asked, attempting to sound dry but laced in the faintest of tremors.

Dazai pushed off of the wall, hands still remaining in his pockets, his action making Chuuya step down and back away from Dazai. (*Where are his shoes-?*) “I presume the same as you,” he replied, and watched as Chuuya folded his arms over his chest with a click of his tongue.

“Don’t be stupid,” Chuuya quipped, turning his head away to expose the column of his neck, bright in the damp darkness of the alley like a moonbeam that caught Dazai’s eye. Chuuya’s face shifted slightly, softening at the edges while still refusing to look up at Dazai. “I’m waiting for someone, and

...” he struggled for a word, flapping a hand at Dazai fruitlessly, eventually settling for just a grunt as punctuation.

Dazai shifted to face him, raising an eyebrow ever so slightly. “Are you sure you want me to leave?” he teased, but there was something sincere in it, something he nearly purred and rolled over his tongue in velvet. “Particularly while dressed as you are.”

Chuuya flushed at the comment, a corner of his lip ticking up in irritation. “And what the hell do you think you mean by that?” he said lowly, but Dazai didn’t answer, a strange smile in place on his face in lieu of an answer.

Because you look like an elegant bird lost from its cage in an unknown world-

*Delicate, gorgeous, **delicious**.*

Chuuya scoffed. “Fine, be an ass. Just get out before I force you,” he said, but Dazai only sighed.

“If you insist,” Dazai said breezily, and he saw Chuuya’s entire body relax, “but before I go, I thought you might want this; after all, I’ve got a pair of rather annoyed florists who I have a bet

running with.” Reaching into his breast pocket, he gently removed the flower and held it out to Chuuya in the center of his palm, the petals stark against his skin and the gold of its center; the red camellia, Dazai’s final signature and name.

Chuuya’s eyes went wide in a mix of something that Dazai couldn’t decipher, before his lips parted faintly in shock. However, when his eyes flicked back up to Dazai, they were filled with confusion and a pinprick of anger. “What is this?” he whispered, delicate but bladed, just as Dazai knew Kouyou always instructed. “Why do you...?”

Dazai smiled gently, like a reluctant, tired heartbeat. “Sing me a Requiem, a song of rest, of death, O Siren, O Muse, and consider it my penance, but perhaps...” he recited softly, sincerely, reaching out to gently lift Chuuya’s hand and press the flower into his own palm as his own words echoed around them, brought to life by voice instead of ink, “just perhaps I can teach you how to love.”

A beat of silence, of processing, and Chuuya’s expression was once of porcelain as he looked down from the flower in his hand back up to Dazai. “How do you know those words?” he demanded, but the reply was breathless, quiet. “Who told you?”

Dazai shook his head faintly, that smile still etched over his face. “Did you not ask me to teach you the impossible?” he countered, watching as Chuuya’s eyes widened even further. “I would have surely thought such a request would have been quite hard to forget.”

Chuuya’s mouth opened again, not moving from Dazai’s face as his fingers curled gently over the blossom, reverent and careful and disbelieving. “You must be messing with me,” he laughed wryly, stepping back from Dazai and leaving a pocket of cold air where his presence once stood. “You have to be.”

Dazai could see the familiar flickers of defensive anger creeping into Chuuya’s face and into his words. Stronger this time, Dazai shook his head again. “I’m not, for once in my life.” His words were sincere and stern, yet careful and warm for the first time he could imagine; he was speaking as he wrote, straightforward and without any need to mask his true self in foolishness.

It was doing deadly things to his heart.

A flash of fear flickered over Chuuya’s face as he took another step backwards from Dazai, and Dazai’s stomach lurched. “You’re the only one who knows- you and Akiko, but she wouldn’t...” he trailed off as his words faded into silence, and the implication of what he meant hit Dazai like a truck.

Don't let him slip, no, you can't let him be hurt, don't you dare make him think he's sick-

“Chuuya, *Chuuya*,” Dazai called as he caught the fleeing man under the arm, making him stop cold. “This isn’t a game, and I’m not trying to mess with you,” he said desperately, and Chuuya glared at him before yanking his arm away.

“Don’t lie to me,” he hissed, but there was the crack of a voice near-breaking within it.

Dazai huffed and cradled his hands around the sides of Chuuya’s face, making the anger on his face blip into one of shock for a millisecond as his hands instinctively came up to latch up onto Dazai’s wrists. “Every line, every *word*- I meant *every single thing* I said in each of those letters, and it was *never* my intention to hurt you, make fun of you,” he said plainly, inches from Chuuya’s face, and he could feel the warmth of frustrated (and mortified) tears under his thumbs. “I couldn’t work up the nerve to try and talk to you myself, so Yosano suggested that I try sending letters instead, and then I ended up meeting you in person, and it just went downhill from there.”

Chuuya’s mouth opened as if trying to say something, breath hitching as his fingers curled into the fabric over Dazai’s wrists, still carefully holding the flower in his grip. “Is it really you?” he mumbled, dubious and hopeful all at once. “*Am I dreaming?*”

(The second question was a wisp of a breath Dazai was sure he wasn’t supposed to have heard.)

Dazai smirked then, pulling his hands from Chuuya’s face. “Would you expect anyone else?” he answered sarcastically, but his smirk evaporated when he saw Chuuya’s face go pink instead of snapping out a retort as usual. Dazai blinked, before the corner of his lips lifted, and he propped his hands on his hips. “So the answer’s *no*?” he teased, and Chuuya turned his head away sharply, reaching out to swat at Dazai.

“Ass,” he muttered, but Dazai only laughed, making the back of Chuuya’s neck go red before he finally looked back up to him. “You’re really serious, though? About... what you said?” he asked, and Dazai gave him an impish look that made Chuuya make a noise of embarrassed irritation, tucking the flower inside his yukata. Something clicked in his head then, eyes widening in realization before a flare of anger lit up his face as he cocked a hip and drummed his fingers on his re-crossed arms. “If that’s true, then you knew the *whole damn time*?”

Dazai nodded.

Chuuya’s lips flattened into a sharp line. “And yet you continued flirting around like a nuisance and poked fun at me? *And-!*” he jabbed Dazai in the chest with an angry finger- “you walked up to

me and handed me your *own damn message* instead of just *telling me* it was from you? What the *hell* is wrong with you?"

Dazai stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I thought you might already know the answer to that question."

Chuuya threw his hands into the air with a disgusted noise. "Six months, and you *waited* despite me literally being right next to you, knowing the whole time with *Akiko* of all people? God, then that means you *both* knew even as I started to-" he stopped dead in the middle of his sentence, eyes widening as his face went solid red, and Dazai couldn't help but wonder what he meant to say. Instead, Chuuya bit his lip with a sour huff. "I don't know whether I want to punch you right now or.... kiss you," he bit out, and Dazai lit up.

"Well, how about I decide for you?" he asked cheerily, and Chuuya shot him an annoyed look.

"Dazai, I swear to god, now isn't the time-" he started, only to be interrupted by Dazai leaning forward to press his lips against his.

Dazai didn't dare press further as he left a chaste kiss there on his lips, leaning back to gauge Chuuya's reaction and feeling his heart tug as he saw the wide-eyed, slack-jawed expression there.

He paused, waiting for Chuuya to yell at him, hit him, *anything*, but instead his world tugged out from under him as Chuuya leaned up to hook his hands behind Dazai's neck and yank his lips back down toward his own, teeth catching lips between their sharp edges in sparks of pain that Dazai's blood sang of brilliantly.

Messy and new, the touch burned before other traces were struck like matches to join it into one huge inferno, a phoenix flame: Chuuya's fingers burying deep into Dazai's hair, tugging and twisting at the strands; Dazai's hands curling around Chuuya's ribs, down his spine, tracing every edge there and dipping fingertips under the edge of the yukata to make Chuuya shiver before dragging downward to cup his hips; the gasps of hot breath between them and the bite of chemical lipstick coating Dazai's own lips as half words and desperate sounds spilled between them; the rush of heat to Dazai's chest at the sound of the low, almost hungry noise Chuuya made as Dazai backed him into the wall, Chuuya grinning against his lips and tugging him closer; the heartbeat roaring in both of their ears in an identical chant of *yes, yes, yes- mine, finally*.

Eventually, the burn in Dazai's lungs became unbearable as he broke the kiss to rest his forehead against Chuuya's, eyes shutting as he focused on the shape of Chuuya beneath his hands and the breaths that fanned out in front of them both, Chuuya's hands loose around his neck. Of course he,

a greedy, greedy human wanted to touch more, to *taste* more, to see what the silvery skin slipping from underneath that blood red yukata tasted of, but he had to stop, even if just for a second as pleasure buzzed through his veins. “God,” he breathed, “I’ve wanted to do that since the first time I saw you on that stage.”

Dazai opened his eyes when he felt the hands at the nape of his neck still, seeing the odd expression on Chuuya’s face despite how his breath slipped and jumped trying to gain purchase. “Really?” Chuuya whispered incredulously.

Dazai nodded faintly, too distracted to try and come up with a witty remark. “Blame Yosano; I was expecting some woman to start performing, but then *you* came on and started singing with that obnoxiously perfect voice of yours, and I knew you were going to be a problem.”

Chuuya laughed faintly, not relinquishing his hold. “You really like my voice that much?” he pressed, too mischevious to be innocent, and Dazai snorted.

“I think you already know the answer to that, so I’m not going to give you more ammunition, *petit chou*,” he replied, and Chuuya huffed, leaning up to look back up at Dazai. With pupils blown wide and face ruddy red, one shoulder completely exposed to the air, Dazai mentally decided that *this* was one of his favorite looks on Chuuya.

“You’re such an *asshole*,” Chuuya quipped, but the soft smile on his face lifting the edges of his kiss-marked lips said the opposite. “Do you know how many times I hated myself because I started to have *feelings* for another person while still writing those letters? If you’d just *said* something from the start than the issue would have been resolved.”

Dazai’s lips quirked up at his confession. “So you’re saying you fell for me *twice*?” he purred, and the hands at his neck tensed. “Well, *Chuuya*, is there something you’d like to tell me?”

Chuuya’s eyes narrowed sharply, before he forced himself up to press a bruising kiss to Dazai’s already-sore lips, stripping the breath from Dazai’s lungs. “Read between the damn lines,” Chuuya whispered sharply against his lips, and Dazai couldn’t help his breath from hiccuping as his arrogance melted away.

He is the curse I’m damned with.

“I’ve been doing that for a long, long time,” Dazai muttered, hands moving up to cup Chuuya’s face before pressing a small kiss to his lips and another to his forehead, “I just don’t think I could have called you beautiful more directly.”

Chuuya snorted derisively. “So full of shit,” he mumbled, drawing his hands down the front of Dazai’s suit jacket.

“And yet you waited,” Dazai fired back, reaching out a hand to twist it into a loose lock of Chuuya’s hair. “You showed me sides of you that you haven’t shown anyone, have you?” Chuuya didn’t answer, only glaring at him through the hair falling into his eyes. Dazai grinned flippantly before his fingers released his hair and traced over the elegant hair sticks. “Where did you get these?” Dazai asked curiously, shifting the topic, and saw a small smile twist at Chuuya’s lips.

“Akiko,” he replied. “I’d been talking about how I wanted to try more of the traditional touches lately, and she just came in today with them.”

Ah, so that’s what was in the box, Dazai realized. They were her ‘good luck’ charm, weren’t they?

Dazai didn’t say anything aside from humming appreciatively before removing his hand, Chuuya tracking the motion. *Do you like them?* his eyes, his expression said, and Dazai’s silence filled the answer in for him, both already so used to this odd, effortless language they already shared.

Beautiful.

They didn’t speak, didn’t try to destroy the shimmering heartbeat held between them in the back alley of Paris, the summer air curling between them as they came to the same realization-

It couldn’t have been anyone else but you.

Thank you for waiting.

True to his word, Dazai did in fact collect the bet from the owners of the floral shop he’d been bothering for *months* with questions and odd requests, though to his recollection he’d only ever see the other partner- a tall, lumbering and fairly quiet man with a disturbing amount of dark hair- at night during the graveyard shifts, mostly communicating with the dry-tongued blond man who seemed misplaced here in the heart of the city with his well-loved overalls and plaid undershirts instead of casual suits. He spoke in a more rugged, swooping French instead of the neatly placed and liquid Parisian tongue, one that reminded Dazai of apple cider and golden wheat crushed

between his finger instead of rich champagne and the gold of blaring billboards.

("If you actually manage to win whoever this is over with your flowers and your bizarre personality-")

"Hey!"

"-then I owe you twenty. Sound fair?"

"Hm. Well, I may just have to take you up on that."

"Deal's on, then. Best of luck?"

("I'll certainly take what little I can.")

Yosano had known the minute Dazai had returned from the alley that night with a love-stupid smile on his face he couldn't force back down, smirking as he approached her. "I take it things went well, then?" she asked slyly, tapping at her lips. "I don't think *you* were the one wearing lipstick tonight."

Dazai paused and swiped at his lips, finding the faintest streaks of pink smeared over his fingers, but he couldn't find it in himself to be embarrassed. Instead, he flashed her a megawatt grin in response, before he placed a hand to his chest and bowed. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have any of this- so thank you," he said sincerely, and she kissed her teeth.

"Straighten up," she chided, and he did as told. "You two would have found your way to each other one way or another even without my help, so there's need to thank me."

Surprised, he stared at her in silence, heartstrings pulling and twisting at her implication.

The air of seriousness melted away as she grinned at him, reaching for her drink and sipping at it. "It would have taken much longer because you two are stupidly obtuse, don't get me wrong," she said, and Dazai gave her a look of insult, "*but* you would have figured it out eventually through all of that hate-flirting cat-and-mouse-game you two enjoy so much."

He laughed quietly to himself, finally taking a seat beside her. "I just hope I can be enough for him," he confessed soberly, turning when felt the burn of a single violet eye staring at him. "What is it?"

"You two, always in the same line of thought, I swear," she sighed in fond irritation. "All you need is to *try*, not to be perfect."

Dazai wasn't able to think of a response to her question, only able to watch her as she finished her drink, the gin of it staining her cheeks pink. *A dangerous woman, this one- she sees through the darkest of curtains and the bluntest of words.*

"Thank you again."

"Don't mention it, dear."

A small, breathless smile stretched his lips as he drummed on the table.

"I wouldn't have any of this without you."

"You two would have found your way to each other one way or another."

Perhaps the poets were right, he thought. Maybe you really do run into Fate whilst taking the road meant to avoid it.

Whatever it was, he was happy to have run into it.

Epilogue.

Two months later.

In the backstreets of Paris, in the heart of a little bar hidden in the back alleys, life and light was

seeping through the cracks of the darkness and the doorways as music and chatter bubbled through it.

Seated at his usual spot of the bar, Dazai was talking with Kunikida as the present performance- a double-piano swing song played by Ranpo on the black piano and Edgar Allan Poe on the white- rocked through the room, a duel inlaid in laughter and deviousness in every press of the keys and every breath of a beat. Beside him to his left was Yosano, and to his right was Chuuya- his own, his very own heart and his very own love, which Dazai made sure to constantly remind Chuuya of just to see him blush- bickering in Dazai's ear, half-buzzed on the wine in his hand.

By now, everyone within their small circle knew of Dazai and Chuuya's relationship, the full declaration of it being the time when Dazai had been loitering in Chuuya's dressing room, bothersome as usual. Eventually, Chuuya had set down the pins in his hand in irritation to stalk over to Dazai, slipping his hands under Dazai's jacket to tug at the line of the suspenders hidden by his lapels and making Dazai stop dead in his verbal tracks. A minute later, and Atsushi had opened the door to find Chuuya having yanked Dazai down to his height and kissing him deeply, which Dazai had thoroughly reciprocated, earning a half-choked laugh of surprise and utter amusement as Atsushi found their positions reversed in a twist of hilarious irony. (Chuuya had pulled away to see Atsushi before his face went bright red, chasing after Atsushi with murder in crude French as Atsushi went sprinting out of the room with "*Hey everyone! Guess what!*" toward the lounge, much to Dazai's amusement.)

At the moment, Atsushi was seated two stools down from Dazai, talking with the younger members of *La Chanson*; both of the Tanizakis had pulled extra seats from an empty table to sit in front of him, and Kenji was perched beside Gin on the rest of the open seats. Kyouka was seated atop the bar next to Kenji, her feet kicking lightly as she listened with a glass of flavored soda water bubbling in her hands.

Atsushi, who was halfway through a retelling of some incident involving a performance of his, was red-faced drunk as he hiccuped through the rest of the tale. At one point, as he broke into laughter as he finished, earning snickers and hoots from the rest of the crowd, Dazai paused when he heard unfamiliar giggling, leaning back to see where it came from, blinking in surprise before nudging Chuuya with a smirk. "Now isn't that a rare sight?" he mumbled, and Chuuya- as well as Yosano and Kunikida, looked over to where he was pointing.

Seated on Atsushi's other side was Akutagawa, just as drunk as Atsushi, with his hand pressed over his mouth as giggles slipped helplessly from his lips. The sound of it made Atsushi laugh even harder as Akutagawa dissolved into uncharacteristic snorts and Atsushi collapsed into his shoulder, both laughing themselves stupid. They positively melted into each other, breathless and smiling as the rest of the group continued snickering.

Both Akutagawa and Atsushi, through their own trials and tribulations, indefinitely changed each

other for the better, growing from anger and sharp tongues to begrudging affection they initially kept reserved and to themselves, kisses and fingers linked together in corners where they thought no one else could see. Now, they were more open and relaxed, both with each other as well as just in general, less quick to anger and instant spats, though there were still a few here and there that rocked and roiled like a furious sea. Even so, Dazai saw the soft kisses pressed to lips and cheeks and the closeness they held with each other that he recognized between himself and Chuuya, and smiled, something proud bubbling in his chest.

“What I wouldn’t give for a camera right now,” Chuuya mumbled, and Dazai snorted.

“I don’t think you’re sober enough to work one,” he retorted, and Chuuya glared at him.

“I’m not drunk yet, idiot,” Chuuya quipped back, scowling when the faintest slip of a slur blurred his words, making Dazai laugh fully. “Shut up!”

“You two are ridiculous,” Yosano hummed, looking to Kunikida. “Don’t you agree?”

Kunikida just raised an eyebrow. “Don’t pull me into this,” he said dryly, and she grinned at him.

“Come on, Kunikida, come get a drink and join the party!” she coerced, sweeping a hand outward toward the rest of the group, a mismatched selection of faces and backgrounds all laughing and *living* without a care. Dazai wiggled his eyebrows at him as Chuuya laid his head on Dazai’s shoulder, mumbling something incoherent, and Kunikida eventually ceded with a sigh, pulling the towel off of his shoulder and walking around the bar to sit next to the Yosano, joining the conversation.

The music of the pianos continued to rise and curl like speckled waves of the milky way, filling the dark room with stars that sparked and burned bright as conversation and voices spurred them on, the reaction mirrored in the players’ faces as Ranpo shot Poe a lopsided, challenging grin that glowed like the light of a supernova, making Poe start with a blush and a note pressed a little too intensely.

Dazai smiled and closed his eyes, simply taking everything in: the smell, the taste, the sound, the feeling of his patchwork family around him and the warmth of Chuuya at his side, already warming so much more than the skin, reaching into his soul and the corners of his heart he’d long dismissed. Quietly, carefully, he leaned down to press a kiss to the top of Chuuya’s head, nosing gently at the forget-me-nots he’d woven through his hair, and saw a sober smile curl at Chuuya’s lips before he buried his face further into Dazai’s jacket, his hands coming up to twist around his arm.

Stars were indeed filling the room, and they were sparkling in the creases of both of their smiles, a tiny constellation known only to them.

Finally.

Mon Cher Fantôme/My love,

There's a universe within these endless worlds, a line of stars falling into the ocean where the horizon kisses the line of the sea, where men sing of folly and write poems of the treasures they cannot keep.

And yet, I have found it within you.

in the night

in the gloom

i found you where monsters once stained my path with ink

you have taught me how to fly

you have taught me how to burn

you have taught me how to feel

and none of it feels wrong- not anymore.

You have taught me the infinite-

you have taught me the impossible-

tu m'as montré la lumière.

You have shown me the light.

Je t'aime,

-Myosotis

(The pale blue flowers of unwavering, unconditional love, speckling and bright like galaxies, forget-me-nots of moments had and loved and learned.)

Chapter End Notes

And we're done! Whoo!

So, how'd I do? I hope I captured the noir age well!

Comments and critiques are highly appreciated! Thanks for reading!

And just in case, the flowers Dazai used in his address lines:

-A. plicatum, Acacia

-Hippeastrum reginae, Amaryllis

-Rhododendron, Azalea

-Iris sibirica, Iris

-Hyacinthus orientalis, Hyacinth

-Astilbe arendsii, Astilbe

-Myosotis, Forget-me-nots

(For those who are of the more thirsty of folk, I've got the sskk closet shenanigans as a mini-chapter!

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Counterproductive

Chapter Summary

A follow up to CdN, for the thirstier of folk who are curious to know what went down in the closet before Chuuya found them.

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Chapter Notes

I actually had this written WAY before I finished CdN as a dare from my sister and it may or may not be titled as "um" in my drafts...

oh well

Enjoy??? It's short, but still slightly sinny

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As the sound of the closet door slamming shut rattled in Atsushi's ears and he felt himself pressed harshly up against the wall, he suddenly wondered how the *hell* he got in this situation.

Yet, at the feeling of a hand winding into his hair and teeth breaking the skin of his lower lip, all he can think is *oh, right, that's why*.

His mind was a dizzy haze of lust and hate and he couldn't discern which was making him dig his hands into Akutagawa's hair and pull him even closer to him, his heartbeat a pounding mantra of *yes yes yes*.

(What am I doing?)

(He pushed the thought away as he felt nimble fingers slip under the edges of his shirt, the touch leaving fire in its wake.)

Atsushi drew in a shuddering gasp when Akutagawa broke their kiss to mouth down Atsushi's neck, hands sliding further up his back. "What are you-?"

"Just *shut up*," Akutagawa muttered as he dragged his nails down Atsushi's back, drawing a groan from Atsushi's lips.

Oh my god.

Atsushi pulled Akutagawa closer by the front of his shirt until they were impossibly pressed against each other, and he hissed when one of Akutagawa's thighs slid between his own to anchor them.

*(What's going on? I thought that I... we-
Oh, screw it.)*

Atsushi looped both arms around Akutagawa's neck until he knotted one hand in the hair at the back of his head, the action forcing Akutagawa's lips against his own with a frustrated hiss.

Akutagawa's hands slipped out of Atsushi's shirt in favor of pressing into his hips, and something Atsushi had never heard before rumbled low in Akutagawa's chest when Atsushi's hips stuttered at the touch.

"Oh god," Atsushi whispered desperately, *"don't stop."*

Akutagawa growled as he ground his leg harder into Atsushi, a vicious smile pulling at his lips (Atsushi could feel it against his own) at the whimper he got in response. "I fucking hate you," he sneered.

"I-" Atsushi's breath hitched, "-I return the damn sentiment."

Akutagawa hummed. *"Good,"* he snarled, fisting his hand in Atsushi's hair and pressing his head into the wall, leaning back down to bite at Atsushi's now-exposed collarbone.

Atsushi's mind was burning, his *skin* was burning, and he was so lost in the sensation of teeth and heat that he couldn't even feel his own heartbeat.

*Months of this stupid competition, months of one-upmanship and fighting, and it somehow led to....
this?*

What's even happening?

I thought we hated each other?

So why are we...?

His thoughts were interrupted when he felt teeth break the skin at his collarbone and a tongue lap at the wound, and Atsushi felt some (sensible) part of him cringe at the *noise* he made.

*Closer, tighter, **harder**, more*

More

More

More-

(He didn't realize just how perfectly they fit together despite all their jagged edges and jagged words, how their lips fit perfectly and their racing, frantic heartbeats matched in time-)

The moment was interrupted when the door was suddenly thrown open, and they both whipped around to see Chuuya standing at the door, surprise only on his face for a second before something knowing quirked at his lips disguised under faux-annoyance.

"Uh, Chuuya-" Atsushi stuttered, now acutely aware of their, um, *situation*, and licked at his kiss-swollen lips in embarrassment. (He knew how he- how *they* probably looked, and felt a fresh blush crawl over his face.)

Chuuya shut the door without another word, and Atsushi swore he heard him mumble something along the lines of “*kids*”.

Atsushi looked back at Akutagawa sheepishly. "So.... um."

Akutagawa scowled before dipping back down to press his lips to Atsushi's again. "Shut up and let me finish," he muttered lowly, and Atsushi felt fingers tug at the edge of his waistband.

Atsushi's stomach lurched.
What did I get myself into?

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks for reading! It's probably the closest I'll ever get to smut but hey, still a benchmark!

(I can't get rid of the note from the first section, so I apologize for the repeat!)

End Notes

And we're done! Whoo!
So, how'd I do? I hope I captured the noir age well!
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And just in case, the flowers Dazai used in his address lines:

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